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Piero Karasu
Illustration by
Yuri Kisaragi
The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady

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The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady

"If this is what it takes to heal your pain, I won't let you win."
"I won't lose to you...! I *can't* lose!"
Euphyllia Magenta
The daughter of Duke Magenta. After the annulment of her betrothal, she joined Anisphia to live in the princess's villa.
Anisphia Wynn Palettia
First Princess of the Kingdom of Palettia. Thwarted her brother Algard's plot to usurp the kingdom but as a result has been reinstated in the line of succession.

“…There’s no way you could be fake!”
“…I have memories of a past life.”

As we wove those words of prayer, our crystalline swords let out a brilliant flash.
Light scattered across the sky like fireworks. Bursts of azure and rainbow-colored particles melted through the air, shining with all their radiance. Just as I had hoped, this was a blessing to all those watching.
The cheers below still hadn't let up. This time, it wasn't only children reaching out for the falling particles of light—everyone held their hands outstretched. Those brilliant pinpoints, melting away against our skin, were so fantastic that I couldn't even speak.
I remained that way seemingly forever, holding tightly to Euphie's hand, until the scene slowly came to an end.
"To all the people who dwell in this land…"
"…blessings be upon you!"
"Let's fill the skies above…"
"…with rainbows."

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ENDING

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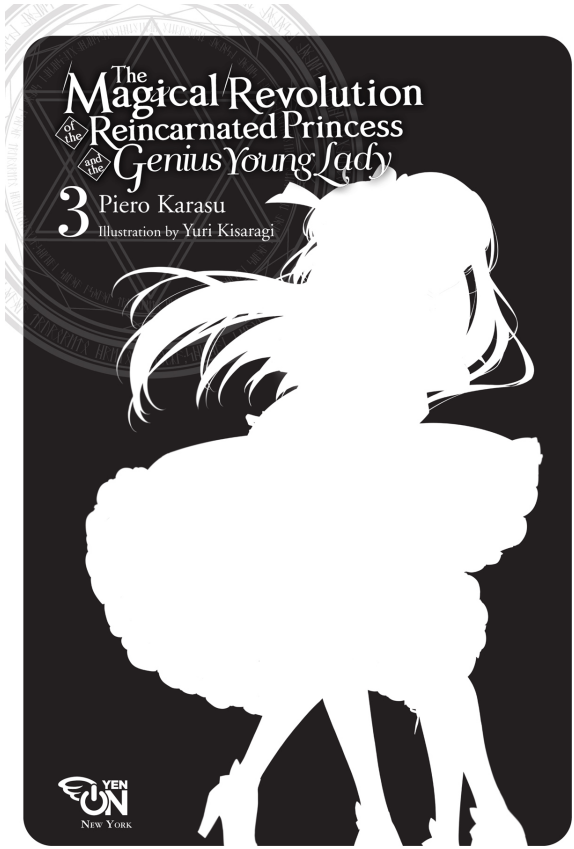
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Illustration by Yuri Kisaragi
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Piero Karasu

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The Story So Far

Princess Anisphia yearns for magic and yet cannot use it. After rescuing Euphyllia, a gifted prodigy, from the commotion of her annulled betrothal, the two young ladies set out on new beginnings. Together, not only do they successfully fend off a dragon attack, they also thwart Prince Algard's plot to usurp the kingdom for himself. But with Algard no longer being eligible to succeed to the throne, a new problem has emerged!

Characters

Ilia Coral
Anisphia's personal maid.

Lainie Cyan
A girl at the heart of the incident in which Euphyllia's betrothal was called off. In reality, a vampire—and now a maid at the detached palace.

Tilty Claret
Daughter of a marquis—and a researcher of curses.

Algard Von Palettia
Anis's younger brother. Presently exiled to the frontier.

Orphans Il Palettia
King of the Kingdom of Palettia. Anis's father.

Sylphine Maise Palettia
Queen formally responsible for the kingdom's diplomacy. Anis's mother.

Grantz Magenta
Duke. Euphie's father and Orphans's right-hand man.

The Story So Far

Piero Karasu
Illustration by Yuri Kisaragi

"…That is my decision, Anis," my father said in a grave tone. He was sitting with his arms crossed in his office at the royal palace, his elbows propped up on his desk, expression grim.

Duke Grantz stood by his side without much of a visible reaction. My mother also maintained a straight face, though I noticed she was clenching her fists tightly.

I let out a deep breath. I wasn't surprised by what my father had said—I had been expecting it, at least to some extent. Yet I did feel a sense of resignation now that it was actually happening.

I forced a smile onto my face, hoping to conceal the emotions bubbling away inside me—a perfect smile that wouldn't leave anyone feeling ill at ease. If I couldn't manage that, I wouldn't be able to do what was required of me from here on out.

"I understand, Father. I was expecting this outcome, and I do believe it's unavoidable, all things considered," I answered brightly.

"…Do you really accept this?" he pressed, his severe expression failing to lighten in any discernable way.

If he was going to be like that, then I would allow a little bitterness to shine through my smile. "I don't like it—but as you said, you've made your decision, Father. I understand full well that I don't have any other choice."

"Anis… You…" My mother's expression faltered as she stared across at me, eyebrows raised. But she said nothing further.

As my mother fell silent, Duke Grantz spoke up next. "In that case, I will begin making arrangements to issue a formal announcement in the near future. I know that it might be inconvenient, but I would like to ask you, Princess Anisphia, for your cooperation during this time."

"I understand, Duke Grantz… Ah, right. What about Euphie?"

"Please keep her by your side for the time being. My own family's future goals hinge on her remaining with you."

"I see. I'm sure I've caused you a good amount of trouble, too, Duke Grantz, so thank you, for everything."

"It's my sacred duty. Rest assured, I pledge to support you with all the resources at my disposal." Duke Grantz placed a hand on his

chest before bowing deeply in my direction. When he continued, his voice was so low and heavy that I could all but feel it echoing through the pit of my stomach.

"The restoration of your position in the line of succession to the throne—I know that this isn't what you desired, Princess Anisphia, but I humbly beseech you to step up to this responsibility as the future head of the royal family of the Kingdom of Palettia."

* * *

"…So you're saying that your position in the line of succession has been restored?"

After receiving my father's decree at the royal palace, I made my way back to my villa at the detached palace and explained what had happened to the others. Euphie was the first to respond. Ilia's eyes widened slightly, while Lainie was too surprised to speak.

"Well, what else can be done? Allie isn't around to take my place anymore," I said.

Two months had already passed since my brother's disinheritance.

Since announcing his intent to break off his engagement with Euphie, the turmoil he had caused had shaken the very foundations of the royal palace. With the Ministry of the Arcane also having been involved in the conspiracy, the resulting commotion had been like a disturbed anthill.

As a result, Allie, the only male heir to the royal line and the presumed future king, was disinherited and exiled. At the same time, the Chartreuse family, who had wielded immense political power with their head serving as the director of the Ministry of the Arcane, had likewise fallen into disrepute. After all that, it had taken a good amount of time for the dust to settle.

I, on the other hand, had spent much of the past couple months recuperating from the dragon-based Impressed Seal I had used during my fight against Allie. While I was able to move again after one week, I had been advised to continue resting while everyone monitored my recovery.

As such, I had been convinced that my father had summoned

me to deliver a stern reprimand on account of my reckless actions—yet as soon as I arrived, I found both my mother and him waiting with ponderous expressions, and I was told that my position in the line of succession would be reinstated.

There was no room in that equation for my own wants or feelings. After all, there was no other potential heir with blood strong enough to stake a claim on the throne. Which was why my father had decided to reinstate *my* claim. I couldn't turn him down.

"…Are you all right with that, Lady Anis?" Euphie asked in a stiff tone of voice.

I could see her innermost feelings reflected in her eyes, her disbelief, her fervent wish that it couldn't possibly be true.

I couldn't help but flash her a sheepish smile. She was taking this more seriously than I was. "It's a royal command, straight from the king himself. Guess I won't be able to spend *all* my days playing around."

"Um… If her position in the line of succession has been restored, does that mean Lady Anis will be the next queen?" Lainie asked, her confusion obvious on her face.

I could feel my strained grin straining further, and I let out a sigh.

"Who knows? A regnant queen would be unprecedented, so I might be expected to rule beside a consort," I replied.

"A consort…?"

"The royal bloodline has to be preserved, right? If Allie is no good, it'll be my job to give birth to a new heir."

I said the words as though they meant nothing to me—yet my stomach tightened with a swell of nausea. I did my best to hold it back, to keep it bottled up.

"Well, people might not even accept me as ruler," I added. "We'll just have to wait and see how things turn out!"

"…They really restored your claim to the throne?" Euphie asked.

"…Well, I still can't use magic. That's a fatal flaw for a member of the royal family."

That was ultimately why I had abandoned my claim to the throne in the first place. The Kingdom of Palettia was created through a covenant forged between mankind and spirits, and what was expected most of its nobility and royal pedigree was magical competence.

If I simply lacked skill, there might still be a chance of salvaging the situation. However, the problem was that I couldn't use magic in the slightest. Additionally, there was no telling whether that trait would be passed on to any children.

Even if I could continue the royal bloodline, there would be no point in me succeeding to the throne if my offspring were held back in the same way I was.

There was always the alternative option of adopting a child from a powerful noble family, but I was quite sure my father would be opposed to that course of action.

After all, there had just been a major incident with the Ministry of the Arcane. If the throne itself was up for the taking, the nobles would turn to conspiracy in order to attain it.

The Kingdom of Palettia might have seemed at peace upon first glance, but there were still major power struggles raging out of sight. Allie's conspiracy, supported by the then-director of the Ministry of the Arcane, served as ample proof of that. Those aristocrats devoted to the supremacy of magic and their faith in magical spirits had been thwarted this time, their goals dealt a severe setback. Even so, a majority among the nobility held spiritualist beliefs. They valued magical skills, the inheritance of tradition, and ties with the spirits themselves above all else, especially when it came to the aristocracy and the royal family. They would never accept me as their leader.

Basically, there are still a whole lot of issues that could end up tearing this country apart…, I thought.

But that was why it *had* to be me. Originally, my father had intended to change the realm gradually. Even if it took years, if it meant spilling less blood in the process, that was the price he was willing to pay. And so he had endeavored to encourage gradual change, to bring people around to new ideas, new ways of thinking.

Though he wouldn't admit it in public, the high hopes he had placed on the insights brought about by my study of magicology, and the magical tools I had produced, were proof enough of this. That was no doubt why he had never put a stop to my research.

If those magical tools were to become widespread among the common folk, then the divide between the nobility and the average commoner could be bridged, even if only a little.

However, that would also bring the common people one step closer to the realm of magic, heretofore the exclusive domain of the

nobility. That would risk a repeat of a conflict that had already taken place in the kingdom in the past.

That was why my father was acting with caution. There could be no denying that he had been at times a little *too* cautious, which had allowed conspiracies like the latest affair to take root under his watch. Count Chartreuse was among the most militant of the spiritualists; as a result of his intrigue, my father had lost his successor, Allie. Now I was his only remaining direct descendant.

Those events had driven him to this decision. He had resolved to recognize me as the heir to the kingdom. Even if that meant having to force abrupt change, he couldn't just let the throne sit vacant and allow the spiritualists to take the reins.

Even though their blood was supposed to be mixed, the nobles stood high above commoners, and that gulf had grown increasingly vast over the years. If left unchecked, that chasm could one day plunge the entire kingdom into despair.

That was why we had to change the course of history here and now. To paraphrase Allie, we had to do *something* to save this country, seeing as it was already rotting from the inside.

"Well, that's how it is. Things might get a little hectic for a while, but it doesn't have anything to do with you, Euphie, Lainie, so don't worry yourselves over it."

"Nothing to do with us…?"

"You're staying at the detached palace as my magicology assistant, Euphie. And Lainie is here as a maid-in-training. It wouldn't be right of me as heir to the throne to force you to tag along on official duties."

From now on, I would be expected to pick up all those royal responsibilities that I had cast aside. To begin with, I would have to inform the nobles that my position in the line of succession had been reinstated.

After that, I would have to start laying the groundwork to one day rule as queen. Duke Grantz would support me, but I would have to secure the backing of other nobles, too.

I had no idea where to even start. I would definitely need to come up with all sorts of schemes to forge the necessary connections. This was the price I had to pay for all the freedom I had been afforded up till now. It couldn't be helped.

I wouldn't be able to continue to enjoy the liberties I had taken advantage of for so long. That thought filled me with a deep

melancholy, which no doubt showed on my face. I had to shake my head in an attempt to rid myself of this depressing feeling.

"…I'll be honest, I'm a little tired. It really did come so suddenly. I think I'll take a break. I'm sorry for always being in such a hurry," I said.

"Lady Anis…," Euphie called out in concern, but I responded simply with a smile and a quick wave as I set off back to my quarters and opened the door to my room.

Only after locking it securely behind me was I able to catch my breath.

I could feel my mask slipping now, after forcing my face for so long. Now that I was alone, I didn't have to worry about keeping up appearances. Leaning against the locked door, I held my face in my hands. I couldn't keep myself standing upright without some kind of support.

"…I was ready for this. I knew it had to happen sooner or later now that Allie is gone. I *have* to do it," I muttered under my breath.

If I hadn't given voice to my thoughts, I wouldn't have been able to accept the reality that had been thrust upon me.

Allie was gone. I would be the next queen. No matter how unsuited I was for the role, I had been born into the royal family. The responsibility had fallen on me to keep it going.

To do what was expected of me, I would have to be acknowledged by the kingdom's nobility as an *acceptable* member of the royal family.

I flinched as I fought back the nausea welling up inside me.

Don't throw up. Don't. You can't let anyone see you like this. Endure. Don't let it show.

I understood the situation well enough. *Someone* had to steer the country, or else there would be no one to protect it. And I was now the only person who could succeed to the throne.

"…It'll be all right," I told myself, voicing it aloud to make it true.

I wasn't a child anymore. Things were different from my youthful days of chasing after the arcane.

I had developed a magical tool for soaring through the sky. I could use other forms of magic through my tools as well. I *had* used them, to defeat a dragon at that.

I had power now. The nobles who had rejected me before would have to accept that. I just had to be ready.

I could afford to laugh now. Everything would be fine. It would be. I could do this. I had to.

So I repeated the affirmation to myself over and over between deep breaths as I fought to regain a sense of calm. Finally, I stepped away from the door and wandered deeper into my room.

In any event, right now, all I wanted was sleep. When next I opened my eyes, it would be time to get to work. There was so much to be done.

On the way to my bed, I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror on the dressing table: platinum-blond hair, the symbol of the royal family; light-green eyes the color of fresh verdure; and a small face, a little childish but nicely balanced. That was all. There was no expression on that face—no emotion whatsoever. What I saw reflected back at me could have been lifeless doll.

I forced my lips into a smile… All right. I was used to faking being happy.

I had already lived this way for so long before, hiding my vulnerabilities so people wouldn't turn against me.

Nothing had changed. I simply had to keep doing the same thing I had always done. So I looked my reflection in the eye.

"I'll be all right. After all…"

After all, I was Anisphia Wynn Palettia, First Princess of the Kingdom of Palettia.

CHAPTER 1

"Is she out of her mind? You're asking yourself the same question, aren't you, Euphie?" Tilty grumbled at me, her mood sullen. She was flustered, clearly taken aback by the news.

She had spent a good amount of time recuperating after the incident with Prince Algard, but now at least, she was back to her daily life—and with that, she was taking charge of Lainie's medical checkups.

Tilty had been confined to her room during her recovery, so she hadn't been kept abreast of all the news and developments. Indeed, she had only heard about the situation in full recently.

By then, word of Lady Anis's reinstatement as heir to the throne had been spreading quietly among the members of the aristocracy. After catching wind of those rumors, Tilty began to let her displeasure be known.

Lady Anis and Ilia had moved back into the royal palace, leaving only Lainie and me to occupy the villa. Indeed, since being reconfirmed as heir, Lady Anis had spent precious little time at the detached palace.

I'm sure she was kept constantly busy. Tilty must have found that idea unpleasant, too, as she raised her eyebrows and clicked her tongue more times than I could count.

"So it's business in the royal palace that's keeping her from joining us here in her own villa? I take it she's meeting with nobles? Hmph. It's a little late for that! They won't *ever* accept her as queen. The king ought to just adopt the child of a powerful nobleman or something."

"What are you saying, Tilty? You can't say such things. It's rude."

"Hmph, if you say so. We all know how incompetent those at the top are. Not that it matters to me."

She was certainly letting the situation dampen her spirits. Still, if I pointed out the contradiction, it would only sour her mood even more, so I let the matter drop.

In fact, I would have liked for Tilty to give Lady Anis a physical checkup as well, but it sounded as though Lady Anis was

purposefully avoiding her. The two still hadn't met face-to-face since the incident.

Lady Anis's expression distorted whenever the subject of the conversation turned to Tilty, while Tilty would all but throw a tantrum in the reverse. I wanted to hold my head in my hands. How could things have come to this?

"You're having a hard time of it, too, I suppose, Euphyllia?" Lainie asked.

"Not really…"

"Oh? But you're at the mercy of this situation as much as anyone, no?" Tilty said. "First you were engaged to the prince, only to have your arrangement called off, then you were picked up by the princess as her research assistant, only for her to all but throw you to the wayside. And yet still you smile."

Tilty's frank words hit home, resounding in my chest. But I shook my head, hoping to let the comments pass me by. I was growing used to holding back the sighs that threatened to escape me.

"Don't worry about me. Are you all right, Lainie?"

"Y-yes…," she answered in a small voice. She had been repressing things up till now, afraid to enter the conversation.

Lainie was dressed as a maid rather than in her personal clothes. Ever since Ilia had taken her on as her understudy, she had been gradually growing into her new role. It seemed the injuries inflicted by Prince Algard hadn't left any lasting scars, probably due to her regenerative powers as a vampire.

Still, he had gouged out her heart and left a grievous wound. That was why Tilty was giving her a full examination. So far, no lasting problems seemed to have surfaced, so at least I could rest assured on that front.

"You're so tame and gentle, Lainie. Not at all like our Princess Peculiar," Tilty remarked, back to her previous foul mood.

"Ah…ha-ha…" Lainie smiled, letting the comments pass her by.

I couldn't hold my silence any longer. "Tilty, are you really that upset by Lady Anis becoming the heir?"

"Hmph. Shouldn't *you* be upset, Euphyllia?"

"…I'm not in a position to complain."

"Position, yes. It's all about position, isn't it? She's a member of the royal family, and you're just a noble, even if the daughter of a duke. That *is* the perfect answer, given your *position*, isn't it, now?

You really are the *perfect* young lady."

Tilty's voice oozed mockery, but her eyes conveyed her terrible sincerity. I didn't know how to respond.

"You understand, don't you?" she continued. "She *has* to be queen, because of her position. That's what you're thinking, right? So go ahead, let her. You can be sure it won't end well."

"H-how can you say that…?" Lainie asked uncertainly.

"Mark my words, if she sets out to become this country's ruler, there will be nothing but trouble," Tilty declared once more.

I understood well enough just how many difficulties stood in the way of Lady Anis becoming queen.

To begin with, she lacked the magical talent that was considered a necessity for any member of the royal family of the Kingdom of Palettia. It was true that her magicology research had produced tangible results, but most members of the nobility hadn't responded well to it—many even regarded it as heretical.

On top of that, she had withdrawn from aristocratic society for quite some time. Even with her father's backing, securing the support of a sufficient number of nobles would be a complicated undertaking. After all, there would be no point in her becoming queen if her vassals refused to follow her.

"I know. Lady Anis won't be welcomed with open arms. But if we start by offering her *our* support…"

"No. Disqualified. You've failed right at the first hurdle. Who told you to start talking about position and politics anyway, Euphyllia?"

"…What's wrong with that…?"

"It won't get you anywhere. Do you really want to repeat the same mistakes you made with Prince Algard?"

Tilty's words almost made me lose my temper. I felt a twitch in my throat, but I raised my hands to my chest and regained my composure.

If I hadn't suppressed my urge just now, I would have tried to throttle her. I could feel the blood drain from my cheeks as the magnitude of my compulsion just now dawned on me.

Lainie lost her temper in my stead. "Lady Tilty! That's going too far! How could Lady Euphyllia *not* be worried about all this?!"

"…I know." Tilty turned away, averting her dour gaze.

The air grew awkward between us, when finally Tilty broke the silence, though she still didn't look at me. "Sorry. I'm venting. If I'm

going to complain, I ought to save it for Anis herself."

"…I understand how you feel."

"Urgh! This is all *her* fault! What right does she have to succeed to the throne now?! What was the point of abandoning her claim in the first place if she was going to let people whisk her right back to it?!"

"What would happen if she didn't accept?" I asked.

"…Well, apart from her, there isn't really anyone else *to* take her place," Tilty admitted.

"Aren't there any other bloodlines that can succeed to the throne?" Lainie asked.

Tilty frowned and shook her head. "Apart from Prince Algard, Anis is the only other direct heir. Strictly speaking, members of a ducal family with royal blood could potentially be considered, but there are other problems to take into account when it comes to the current batch of dukes."

I nodded along to this explanation, before adding a few comments of my own. "If Lady Anis was to refuse the throne, it would have to go to a powerful noble instead, or else the king would have to adopt a son from another family. Either option would cause further power struggles. It could even lead to all-out war."

Lainie rubbed her arms as though a chill had fallen over her. She was clearly enjoying this topic as little as I was. She was unusually quiet when she asked, "…Does that mean Lady Anis *has* to accept it? Even if the other nobles don't accept her…?"

"She doesn't have the necessary gift to rule as queen. It's a pretty fatal flaw, wouldn't you say?" Tilty responded.

"Then what else is she supposed to do?! Why is everyone so selfish?!" Lainie cried out.

I could respond only with a pained expression.

Tilty was equally perturbed. "The spiritualist factions among the nobles, those obsessed with their faith, will no doubt want to plot her downfall. After all, if she falls from grace, one of them, or maybe one of their children, could potentially take her place."

"…*Everyone* is too selfish. Isn't that what turned Lady Anis and Prince Algard against each other? Why does power have to be so important?" Lainie shook her head, unable to accept the reality of the situation.

Staring back at her, I was taken in by her dazzling purity.

"…There aren't many nobles who think that way. This kind of problem has been plaguing the Kingdom of Palettia for a long, long time," Tilty remarked.

"…How long?" Lainie asked.

"Haven't you studied history? You know what happened just before King Orphans took the throne, right?"

"Um… You mean the coup d'état led by his elder brother, the crown prince?"

"This story has close ties to your own father. The previous king—Anis's grandfather—devised a policy not only to grant aristocratic titles to certain commoners descended from noble blood, but also to elevate exceptional commoners regardless of their heritage. This, however, was met with fierce opposition by the more militant nobles at the time."

The aristocracy of the Kingdom of Palettia placed great importance on their bloodlines. Not only did those ties serve to bind the various houses together, but more important than anything else, they were the means by which one's magical abilities were passed on to the next generation.

As such, there was a deep-rooted desire among much of the nobility to be clearly separate from the common folk. Apparently, this tendency had been even stronger before King Orphans took the throne.

"At the time, everyone assumed that mixing noble blood with that of commoners would dilute one's gifts. It was illegal to have any relations with commoners, even to elope with them. No matter who you ask, they'll all say things were much worse back then."

"…So King Orphan's brother staged a coup?"

"Yes," I answered. "Many nobles were even more eager to ensure a clear class divide between themselves and the common folk than they are now."

"And the commoners were more discontent, too," Tilty continued. "Haven't you heard? Apparently, the situation was so dire that the whole kingdom was on the verge of falling apart."

The aristocracy had wanted to establish themselves as the exclusive members of a privileged class. Even today, there were still some who held such views. There was no end to rumors of arrogant, domineering noblemen, and of commoners fearful and weary of such aristocrats. Of course, that wasn't what a noble should aspire to be.

“Let’s get back to the topic at hand, yes? Background aside, the coup d’état happened. The problem is that it was initiated by the militant nobles. Most of those with warrior expertise capable of marshaling their forces rose up in rebellion. Prince Orphans, as he was at the time, did well to keep the country intact.”

“…That’s also when my father, and Queen Sylphine, too, rose to prominence,” I noted.

“Exactly. It’s no exaggeration to say that the two of them are only in their current positions because of their efforts to bring the coup under control. It’s said they emerged as the strongest figures in the whole kingdom.”

“Wow… Your father really is a great man…”

I could only offer an awkward smile to Lainie’s words of praise.

My father excelled at wielding a wide variety of different kinds of magic, and he had great talent both in military strategy and in politics, too. People often told me I was just like him, but to be honest, I felt like I was nowhere near his level.

“…Huh? Won’t Duke Magenta’s family be all right? They’re also related to the royal family, aren’t they?” Lainie asked.

“It’s true that we have royal blood in our veins,” I answered. “But that was a long time ago. Given how far removed we are from the current royal family, that possibility would only be raised much later, if at all.”

“Besides, it would be next to impossible for King Orphans to adopt one of Duke Magenta’s children. That would cause a whole swathe of other problems,” Tilty remarked.

“Other problems?” Lainie echoed.

“After the coup d’état, Duke Magenta reorganized the militant nobles who had been on the losing side and placed them under his direct control. Which is how his own faction came to be. If he or his family took over the throne, it would mean that those involved in staging the coup would be put in charge of the kingdom’s affairs. The Ministry of the Arcane would no doubt resist that with all their might.”

“…Why would the Ministry of the Arcane be against it?” Lainie asked, pursing her lips.

Her reluctance was understandable. No doubt she had a bad impression of the ministry after its involvement with Prince Algard’s plot. To be honest, I couldn’t deny that I felt a degree of antipathy toward it, too.

“Because most of the nobles affiliated with the ministry belong to houses that supported King Orphans’s accession to the throne. When the coup d’état took place, His Majesty brought the ministry, which until that point had maintained a neutral stance, into his camp. It’s only thanks to their achievements then that the ministry has so much power and influence today.”

“I see…”

“The Ministry of the Arcane was established as an organization dedicated to studying magic and deepening the people’s faith in spirits. Basically, it had an advisory or counseling role. However, once it amassed more power, things changed. They like to call themselves the forefront of the kingdom’s culture—but in the end, its ranks are just filled with a bunch of old men obsessed with past glories.”

“That’s going too far, Tilty,” I cut in. Her outspokenness would get her into trouble.

In addition to serving as a research institute, the Ministry of the Arcane was also responsible for compiling historical records and for managing a wide range of special events.

It was supposed to be neutral during times of discord for precisely those reasons, but that changed when King Orphans appealed to it for help during his brother’s coup.

“For better or for worse, the ministry places tremendous importance on the authority of magic,” Tilty continued. “They sing the praises of the founders of the Kingdom of Palettia, of befriending spirits and abiding by their will. Their chief concern is to carry on and defend the kingdom’s traditions. That’s why they’re so opposed to Anis. Because her ideas are too innovative, too revolutionary—and the ministry is too conservative.”

“I see…”

“Still, the ministry went and caused a huge mess this time around. The director’s office is still vacant after Count Chartreuse was removed for his role as the mastermind of the latest incident, so they can’t make much of a move. I’m guessing His Majesty is trying to solidify Anis’s position while he can. But I think we can see the distribution of power now that Duke Magenta is backing her, too.”

“…Um, in that case, isn’t there anyone else? Apart from the Magentas?”

“The ducal houses that weren’t destroyed during the coup

attempt lost their leaders in a string of executions. There's no one left among them who can inherit the throne."

"So it's impossible?!"

"Exactly. That's why Algard, who was supposed to be the next king, should have been brought up with great care… I do sympathize with His Majesty, though…" Tilty shrugged.

There was no mistaking that His Majesty had treasured Prince Algard. Not only had I been betrothed to him, the children of various other noble families had been carefully selected as candidates to serve in his court, and they had all received very favorable treatment as far as I could tell.

"Is magic really all that important? I don't understand. What does it have to do with the royal duties of a king or queen? Isn't running a country more about politics?"

Just as Lainie said, one's arcane aptitude didn't really have much of a bearing on the practical management of a kingdom. I had no response to offer.

Tilty answered in my place. "That's why magic is a curse. In the old days, nobles had to take the lead when it came to protecting the common people. We've developed the realm now, and life has become more stable for most, but the power is still a necessity in times of emergency. It's important to be prepared. It isn't an inherently bad idea, taking care not to dilute those bloodlines so as to ensure that there are capable magic wielders in future generations. It's the duty of those with power, and royalty needs to lead by example."

"…Is that why the royal family is expected to be able to use magic?" Lainie whispered.

Tilty offered a quiet nod. I could say nothing to refute her.

Not diluting one's blood meant having to continue to serve as a magic user. After all, the ability was necessary to defend the Kingdom of Palettia, which was vulnerable to all kinds of dangerous monsters. In a way, it was understandable that this power should become a symbol of authority.

"But I wonder just how many nobles really aspire to be all that these days?" Tilty questioned aloud.

"…That's…"

"The best magic users, the *elites*, as people call them, tend to join the Ministry of the Arcane, where they have a huge influence on politics and always hearken back to the glories of the past," Tilty

continued. “Even if Duke Magenta tries to oppose them, the nobles aligned with him aren’t strong enough to have much influence on politics. Most were forced to rebuild their houses after the coup, reassigned to distant territories away from the capital, or banished to knightly orders on the frontier. Like it or not, the Ministry of the Arcane is slowly but surely reshaping the kingdom to suit themselves.” She clearly found the very idea opprobrious.

When His Majesty became king, the ministry, having supported him during the coup, similarly grew in position and power. And now, as Tilty had put it, they were disseminating their own ideas about how the kingdom out to be run.

“That’s why Anis is an anathema to them. For better or for worse, she’s forcing too much change onto the kingdom.”

“Because of her magical tools?” Lainie asked.

“That’s part of it… But the bigger problem is that she doesn’t see magic as sacred.”

I found myself nodding along to Tilty’s explanation. Lady Anis did seem to have little in the way of faith when it came to spirits. For example, at one point while describing her theories, she had described spirit stones as the *corpses* of spirits.

She was certainly aware that using such terms would be considered disrespectful to entities that most people considered objects of worship. That was probably why she had devised a new school of thought, magicology, and why she had created her magical tools. However, the Ministry of the Arcane considered them both unacceptable.

“But it isn’t just those magical tools that have caused friction with the ministry. The bigger problem is that she doesn’t *believe* in spirits.”

“She doesn’t?”

“She understands that spirits exist, of course, and she’s thankful enough to them. But as far as she’s concerned, spirits aren’t absolute. She doesn’t hesitate to use spirit stones in her experiments even though people consider them to be gifts. I’m sure you can imagine how well a ministry that wants to cherish tradition and faith would take *that*, yes?” Tilty asked, her eyes narrowing in a squint.

Lainie nodded ponderously.

The gulf that lay between Lady Anis and the Ministry of the Arcane ran long and deep. She certainly didn’t make light of spirits,

but then again, she didn't see them as entities to worship, either.

"Hypothetically speaking, if everyone were to accept Anis as queen, the Kingdom of Palettia would no doubt rise up to heights unseen in all of history," Tilty explained. "But something tells me that's precisely the future the Ministry of the Arcane most wants to avoid."

"…Why is that?" Lainie asked.

"Because her rise would also mean her magical tools are becoming more widespread. And her ideas, too. But those ideas would eat away at the privileges of the aristocracy."

"…Their privileges?"

"The nobility is only as powerful as they are because of their duty to defend the kingdom. They deal with any stray monsters, they protect the realm, they serve as political leaders, and they lead the people. And that authority is supported by their use of magic. So they take special pride in that ability."

I picked up from where Tilty left off. "But Lady Anis has her magical tools, which can be used by both nobles and commoners alike. Can you imagine what might happen should that become the norm, Lainie?"

She drew her eyebrows together in a troubled frown. She seemed disturbed by where her thoughts had led her. Her voice took on a nervous lilt as she answered, "…Commoners wouldn't need the protection of the nobility anymore…?"

I nodded in agreement. That was no doubt the root cause behind the conflict between Lady Anis and the Ministry of the Arcane.

Magic was an exclusive right of the nobility and the reason behind their elevated status in society.

But what would happen if the common people were capable of protecting themselves?

The divide between noble and commoner would continue to widen. And if those commoners, dissatisfied with the aristocrats ruling over them, could make use of magical tools as a matter of course?

That would undoubtedly pose a threat to the nobility. And now Lady Anis had opened the world's eyes to the possibility of magical tools.

"Of course, we're not talking about today or tomorrow or the immediate future here. But who can say that the common folk

won't rise up in rebellion, once they possess power capable of competing with the nobility? All things considered, it would be a miracle if they didn't."

"…I…see…" Lainie nodded quietly, overcome with bitter emotion.

Had she experienced something herself, I wondered, that prompted her to accept Tilty's explanation?

Speaking personally, I couldn't fully comprehend the suffering of the common people. Because of that, I couldn't fully empathize with them. Still, I had learned enough to know that a situation, if left unchecked, could quickly take a terrible turn.

"…Do the people *want* change?" I asked aloud.

Neither Tilty nor Lainie responded right away. Tilty maintained a straight face, while Lainie looked to be choosing her next words with care.

"I don't know a whole lot about them," Tilty said at last. "I'm a noblewoman and a shut-in, after all. I'm just talking about what I understand."

"What about you, Lainie?"

"…I'm not sure. I grew up in an orphanage. My experiences are too narrow to know what other people are thinking. But still…"

"…But?"

"I think the number of orphaned children keeps increasing. There are lots of reasons why a child might end up at the orphanage —some parents are too poor and have no choice but to abandon them, and noble families often end up with illegitimate children, too…"

"…There are more orphans now?" I asked.

"Yes. Even after my father took me in, it keeps going up every year."

If an increasing number of children were being orphaned, that could only mean that more and more people were living in poverty. For parents who couldn't manage by themselves, they had no choice but to abandon their children to the care of an orphanage.

His Majesty and my father couldn't possibly be unaware of this reality. Were they unable to reach out to those suffering from impoverishment?

"Anis probably knows more than anyone how they're living," Tilty noted. "She's an adventurer, after all, and frequently spends time in the castle town. She doesn't mind venturing outside the

royal capital, either. I'd be surprised if she *didn't* know what kinds of lives the people live, what they think of the nobility—you name it."

"That's certainly true…," I acknowledged.

"If the common folk are really suffering and need someone to stand up for them, she wouldn't hesitate to leap to their defense. The gulf between the two classes might be constantly growing, but it hasn't reached a breaking point just yet."

I couldn't help but agree with Tilty's assessment. Lady Anis was a good person at heart. She worked on the behalf of the people around her to the best of her ability.

If she had truly laid eyes on an untenable situation, she would have surely acted. It was that very sense of justice that had led to her doing battle against her own brother not too long ago.

"While Prince Algard was still here, she thoroughly refused the very notion of succeeding to the throne," Tilty said. "She thought everything would be better off that way. That was probably partly to blame for her feud with Prince Algard, but she's often causing trouble like that. She's keenly aware of just how much she can get away with."

"…But even if she becomes queen, that won't end her disagreements with the religious nobility, will it?"

Lainie's next question silenced both Tilty and me yet again. If Lady Anis *did* take the throne, her magicology and magical tools would be entrenched as a valid alternative to traditional magic. And once those gifts landed in the hands of the common people, they would only want more power.

There could be no turning back the tide once events were set in motion, nor could there be any escaping the inevitable clash with the more traditional-minded nobles who wanted to protect their privileges. If the situation went poorly, it could even spark a second open rebellion.

Tilty and Lainie must have realized that just as well as I had, as a discomforting silence spread throughout the room. But at that moment—

"I'm back!" echoed a cheerful and carefree voice as Lady Anis threw open the doors and stepped inside.

We were startled as she suddenly burst into the room. She wore a wide grin at first, but the second she saw Tilty, she froze in place.

"H-huh? Tilty? You're still here…? I thought you must have

gone home by now…" She forced a smile; she was trying to brush this unexpected encounter aside…

Why, I wondered, did that gesture strike me as somehow *wrong*…?

As I probed my doubts, Tilty rushed toward her. Lady Anis tried to retreat, but that only prompted Tilty to charge after her even faster, until she caught her in her arms and lifted her into the air. Lady Anis tried to resist for a moment, but when she saw Tilty's expression, she stopped struggling.

"…Why are you making that face?"

"Ah, no, I mean, I—I guess it was wrong of me to try to avoid you…," Lady Anis stammered.

"You know full well that's not what I mean!" Tilty quivered with rage. She ground her teeth and glared down at Lady Anis.

Lady Anis, on the other hand, let out an embarrassed laugh. She was clearly hoping to end this quickly, but her voice was unmistakably sapped of energy.

I was unsure what to do before this strange picture. Finally, Ilia stepped up from behind and pulled them apart. "Lady Tilty, please restrain yourself…," she said.

"…Y-you—you're…you're a fool, a real fool, you know?!" Tilty cried out to Lady Anis. "If you're going to act like that, I won't have anything to do with you anymore!"

"…Right. Sorry?"

"I'll need to examine the effects of your Impressed Seal. But I don't want to see you here, so you had better come see *me* when you're ready. After all, you decided you had other business today, even though I came all the way here to check in on Lainie. And don't smile if you don't mean it. It's disgusting. Act like that again, and I'll send you packing!"

It was as clear as day that Tilty was being awfully inconsistent, saying that she wanted to give Lady Anis a full examination, but at the same time insisting that she didn't want to see her. Yet Lady Anis nodded along to her tirade as though nothing at all was out of the ordinary.

It was a strange exchange—yet somehow, I suspected that the two of them were on the same page, and that thought sent a mysterious chill running down my spine, even leaving me feeling as though my heart had been swallowed by cold darkness.

What on earth is this…?

I didn't know…but I was certainly scared.

With that realization, I was left stunned. I couldn't discern the meaning of the interaction between these two individuals, but my intuition whispered to me that I couldn't afford to overlook this strange sense of discomfort.

"I'm going home!" Tilty shouted while I was busy turning over my own thoughts.

She left faster than anyone could keep up, with only Ilia chasing after her to see her off, leaving me, Lainie, and Lady Anis alone in the room.

"…Ah, I messed up. Well, I'll have to apologize next time I see her…," Lady Anis said with a sigh as she rubbed her temples. Her shoulders were drooping, leaving her looking downhearted… But still she forced herself to smile.

"Lady Anis."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. I knew something like that would happen, which was why I was trying to avoid seeing Tilty. I thought she must have left. I let my guard down."

"That's fine. But more importantly…"

"Don't worry about Tilty. It's my fault. Still, this could turn into a problem if she's angry…"

…Was I imagining things? I hoped so, but still a certain doubt niggled away at the back of my mind.

Lady Anis… Where were you looking just now? Who were you talking to…?

She was standing directly in front of me, but she had yet to fully meet my gaze. That was all, and yet the chill that had fallen over me refused to abate. I couldn't help but feel as though I was somehow excluded from the world contained in her vision.

I don't know why that thought occurred to me. That was the most frightening thing about it. I had never before known fear like this. And so when Lady Anis finally looked up at me, I felt, for some reason, a wave of joyous relief.

"Ah, right. Euphie. I think I'll be able to take a break today, so I've got an idea!"

"…An idea?"

"Yep. It's the Arc-en-Ciel! You asked me to fix it, right?"

The Arc-en-Ciel had been broken in half when I had used it to intervene in Lady Anis's fight with Prince Algard, so I had asked her to repair it for me.

She had mentioned once before that she was friends with a blacksmith in the castle town, so she must have asked him for help.

"Yep, I can't wait to introduce you to the blacksmith! And this is the perfect opportunity!"

"Do you mean you want me to go with you into town?"

"Yep! We can pay a visit incognito! We could do with a change of scenery, don't you think?"

"All right… But what about protection?"

It was all well and good to enter the castle town in disguise, but she was still a member of the royal family. An unsettling premonition, different from the one that had come over me earlier, had begun to take root.

Lady Anis's response was ruthless, instantly shooting down my suggestion: "We don't need an escort. We can protect each other! Besides, I'll let my father know, so he'll send someone to follow after us later, all right? So don't worry about it."

"…Are you sure?"

"It's a little late now, right?"

She might have been afforded a degree of freedom before, but now with Prince Algard gone, she was the only heir to the throne!

Before I could issue any further complaint, she entwined her arm around mine in a semblance of a hug and glanced up at me to meet my gaze. "…Riiight?"

No, I wanted to say, but her pleading expression prevented me.

I glanced across at Lainie for help, but she simply flashed me a faint smile and shook her head. She was suggesting that I let the matter drop.

"Right? It'll be fine; won't it, Euphie?"

I had no choice but to surrender myself to Lady Anis's sweet voice.

I still had my doubts whether it was really a good idea for the two of us to be journeying alone, even if in disguise—but ultimately, I ended up getting whisked along by Lady Anis's enthusiastic momentum, and now we were making our way into the castle town.

Rather than my usual clothes, I was dressed in the kind of simple attire that commoners tended to wear, my conspicuous silvery-white hair tied up in a bun and hidden beneath a wide cap.

Lady Anis, standing by my side, had concealed her hair under a similar hat. Nonetheless, even having changed into a set of simple clothes, with her adorable face, she didn't really look like a commoner's daughter. Would these disguises really be convincing?

"This way, Euphie!"

"Y-yes, Lady Anis… Uh, *Anis*, I mean…"

I was supposed to refrain from addressing her formally as part of this ruse, but calling her simply by her name didn't come easily. I let out a sigh and made a mental note not to slip up again.

At that moment, Lady Anis chuckled softly. "Heh-heh. I'm sure you'll get used to it, Euphie."

"…I'll do my best."

"You should try to speak a bit more casually, too. But then, you're always polite, so that might not be an easy thing to ask, huh?" she said with bright laugh.

I felt my cheeks heating up and stared at the ground.

Was this embarrassment or worry? Either way, would I really be able to pull off a secret trip into the castle town without revealing my true identity…?

"Do you come to the castle town often?" Lady Anis asked.

"Only on business with my father…"

To be honest, I didn't like venturing out into public too much. With my being the daughter of a duke, common people inevitably shrank back whenever I was present. That said, as Prince Algard's fiancée, I had always maintained the prospect of learning from their lives, too. I did miss that.

Now my social position was up in the air. I was serving in the detached palace as a magicology research assistant, but Lady Anis had been kept so busy with political affairs lately that our research had practically ground to a halt.

But Lady Anis never mentioned politics around me. That was probably her way of trying to be considerate. Still, I *was* her assistant, so when she told me to rest, I was in effect left with nothing at all to do.

At one point, I had been considered worthy of becoming the kingdom's next queen—but now there was no such pressure on me at all. I was keenly aware that Lady Anis was protecting me, but that also made it so hard to breathe at times…

"Here we are, Euphie!" she called out, dragging me back from my idle thoughts.

It looked like we had arrived at our destination—a nondescript workshop, the kind that you could find in abundance throughout the castle town. That said, it was smaller compared to many of the others and probably favored individual orders over mass production.

According to my father, even though places like this were all workshops of a kind, they often varied in terms of the items they built and to suit the requirements of their environment and owners.

The larger the workshop, the more influential the merchants associated with it and the more likely they would be to have a good nose for business ventures.

On the other hand, small workshops tended to be run by a single artisan operating alone and were often more particular about their work, paying special attention to their craftsmanship. It

certainly seemed natural to approach a small workshop with a skilled artisan for new magicology inventions.

The sign near the entrance read GANA ARMORY.

Anis pushed open the door without knocking and walked straight inside. “Tomas! It’s me!” she called out.

“W-wait, L— Anis…!”

I rushed after her, only to be greeted by a picture-perfect scene of a handsome young man standing in the center of the room.

He had a head of closely cropped light-brown hair and sharply raised reddish-brown eyes, while his muscular physique was no less toned than that of a knight.

If there was anything to critique about his appearance, it would probably have to be his apparent lack of cheer. Was he the craftsman here, the one whom Lady Anis had called Tomas?

Even though the two of us had just barged inside, he said nothing. He simply let out a deep sigh, wrinkling his brow as he looked on, dumbfounded. “…Lady Anis. You took your time.”

“Hiya, Tomas! Have you finished it?”

“Hmph. It’s done. Take it and go.”

I was taken aback by this exchange. Despite all her talk of *going incognito*, this man recognized her. I was at a loss to decide whether I should take his attitude as one of rudeness or familiarity.

As I pondered this dilemma, Tomas’s gaze turned to me. After giving me a somewhat quizzical once-over, he turned back to Lady Anis. “Who’s this girl?” he asked.

“My assistant. I did say I’d bring her along with me this time, right?”

“…Ah. *That* assistant. This isn’t really a good place for a pretty young lady to visit,” Tomas murmured irreverently.

I felt like snapping at him for his attitude—until I remembered that Lady Anis had said something about him not being particularly fond of nobles.

In that case, rather than standing on ceremony, maybe I should try to great him in a more natural way? I thought. I took a deep breath and turned toward him. “Nice to meet you. I’m Euphie. I would greatly appreciate it if you could let me know your name.”

“I know who you are. You’re Duke Magenta’s daughter. People have been talking about you. Apparently, Lady Anis here stole Prince Algard’s fiancée. So that’s you, huh?”

“Wh-what?! *Stole?!*” Lady Anis protested. “I told you, didn’t I?!

It's complicated!"

"Hmph… I don't want to get involved in any feuds between nobles. Count me out of it," Tomas said sternly. He might have had a relatively muscular and handsome appearance, but above all, his expression was a severe one.

"Come on, Tomas. Euphie introduced herself, so now it's your turn."

"Tomas Gana…milady."

"Please, there's no need to stand on ceremony. I'm just Euphie today. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"…Right. That helps." With that, his demeanor seemed to soften a little. While he wasn't very good at speaking respectfully, he didn't seem to be a bad person at heart. Maybe he was just a somewhat difficult craftsman?

"So, Tomas? The Arc-en-Ciel?" Lady Anis asked.

Tomas wiped his hands, before stepping into the back room to retrieve the sword. "See for yourself," he said upon his return.

"All right." So saying, I took the sword, still encased in its sheath, from Tomas.

No sooner did I rest my hand on the hilt than I knew—it felt exactly the same as it had before being broken.

It fit into my hands so naturally that I could hardly believe I had been without it for so long. As I pulled it from the sheath and raised it into the air, there was no sense of discomfort or unease. Confirming that there seemed to be nothing stopping me from channeling my magical energy through it, either, I breathed a sigh of relief.

"It's wonderful," I said. "Exactly the same as before."

I was beyond grateful that it had been restored so perfectly. I had felt naked without it, unable to relax. Ilia's warning had proven true—once you got used to life with magical tools, you couldn't go back to doing without.

As I let that warm feeling wash over me, I noticed Tomas staring at me with slightly widened eyes. "Um… Is something wrong?" I asked.

"No… I can see now that you're using it properly. I knew I could trust you, seeing as Lady Anis spoke so highly in your favor, but seeing you for myself has cleared any lingering doubts…"

Ah, right. I nodded in understanding. As a craftsman, he was particular about his work—and so given his antipathy toward

nobles, he must have been concerned about how the fruits of his labor would be treated.

Seeing him with my own eyes, I could understand why Lady Anis trusted him to forge her weapon- and armor-type magical tools.

"I'm not myself without the Arc-en-Ciel. It's wonderful, Tomas. Thank you."

"…Yeah." He nodded slightly. Was it me, or did he appear satisfied by my response?

After a short pause, he narrowed his eyes, sinking deep into thought. Then he turned to Lady Anis, who had been letting her gaze wander idly around the workshop. "Lady Anis, I'll give you some pocket money, so why don't you go and buy something from one of the stalls around here?"

"Huh?! Really?!"

"H-hold on!" I leaped forward in shock. Had I misheard?! She might have been visiting the castle town in disguise, but she was still a royal princess! And *he* was giving *her* pocket money?! How could he treat her like a small child?!

Plus, he shouldn't do anything to make her feel so uncontrollably ecstatic! And her, too—she was a royal princess! How could she end up jumping for joy over a few coins?!

"I want to discuss something with Euphie," Tomas said.

"…Hmm? She isn't an easy girl to woo, you know," Lady Anis teased.

I had no idea what to make of this exchange. Uncomprehending, I could do nothing more than look on as the two of them continued to talk over one another.

"I'm not trying to win her heart or anything… So how about it? Can you leave now? Yes or no?"

"You're not usually one for talking, Tomas. But fine, I'll go."

"Good. This isn't really something for *Princess Anisphia* to hear."

Just what was Tomas talking about? I could only frown in confusion as he emphasized Lady Anis's royal title.

Did he want to talk to *me*—alone? Without Lady Anis present? What on earth about? We had only just met!

Lady Anis paused for a moment in thought, before giving us both a short nod. "All right. I'll step out then."

Having received her agreement, Tomas handed her a number of coins. As soon as they clinked into her hands, Lady Anis stepped

outside, acting as if she didn't have a care in the world.

I thought for a second to call her back—but in truth, I was curious why Tomas wanted to speak with me so badly, so I watched her leave.

"…Sorry about sending her off like that," Tomas said with an apologetic look. It looked like he had a habit of scratching his head when he was nervous. His countenance remained on the stern side, but I could tell from his emotive gestures that he was a surprisingly expressive person.

"I don't mind… Is there anyone else in your workshop?"

"No. I realize full well that I'm a bit of a grouch. Besides, I like working alone on things that interest me… I've got a chair for visitors, if you want to sit. It might not be to your standards, though…"

Tomas went to fetch the chair, so I decided to indulge him. He soon returned with another for himself, so we sat down across from one another.

"…Does Lady Anis strike you as a little strange?" he asked.

"…Enough to make me wonder whether there's really such a thing as common sense," I replied.

"Right. Still, she's a good person, if you ask me."

"Yes, I think so, too."

If I didn't, I would hardly have accompanied her. I honestly had no idea what would have become of me without her generosity.

When Prince Algard broke off our engagement, I lost sight of my whole reason for being. If I had been left to myself, my heart would have been completely broken, and the kingdom itself might have been transformed into something unrecognizable.

I was only here today thanks to Lady Anis's intervention… No doubt that was precisely why I felt so helpless.

"…So, Euphie, do you mind if I ask you something straight, no-holds-barred?" Tomas said, pulling me back from my thoughts.

His expression had turned more serious than before. He had resolved himself on something.

I figured I ought to respond in kind to his sincerity, and I sat up straight. "Of course. What is it?"

"…Is Lady Anis going to be our next queen?"

I caught my breath at this question. Why on earth would he ask that? I had no way of knowing, but I felt like I could trust him. "At present, she *is* in line to inherit the throne. You must have heard

how Prince Algard was disinherited?"

"That's why I'm asking. So she will be our next ruler?"

"Yes, I think so."

"…I see." Tomas let out a deep sigh. He clearly wasn't pleased to hear this.

Something about his expression made me feel uneasy.

Did the common people consider Lady Anis unworthy? Was that why Tomas seemed so concerned? Was that why he had asked her to go outside, so he could ask me this without her overhearing?

…But if that was the case, why ask me? Was it simply that I was the only person here capable of providing an answer?

"Is it a hundred percent certain, Lady Euphie?"

"…Are you worried about her becoming queen?"

At this question, Tomas's expression faltered. No single word came to mind that could fully encapsulate the emotions he was trying to hide.

Regret, sadness, anxiety. His countenance had broken down into a complex mixture of emotions, one that I'd certainly seen before.

"It's not what you're thinking. Lady Anis is always concerned about the well-being of the people." Tomas's facial muscles loosened, a sense of pride washing over him. "Our lives have improved in so many ways thanks to her advice to the king. She sees us, and she comes up with real suggestions to fix the issues that affect us. She might pretend that's normal for someone in her position, a noble, royalty—but I think we both know it isn't, right?" With those words, his expression turned grim once again, his eyes narrowing accusatorily. "Most nobles aren't interested in how we live our lives. They can't understand the problems we face. They don't even understand that there *are* problems."

"…It's true. Nobles are nobles, and commoners and commoners. But I think we need to find some way to bridge that divide."

"…I'm glad to hear you say that." Tomas's expression softened at my response. I must have placated his ire.

"In exchange for their wealth and status, nobles are supposed to bear a responsibility," he said. "That's what Lady Anis said once… which is why I hate them. Or to be fair, I hate those nobles who fling around their privileges while they walk all over us regular folk."

I couldn't know what had happened in Tomas's past, but his

voice was steeped in hatred. I could offer him no response, so I lowered my gaze.

Members of the aristocracy did have responsibilities commensurate with their positions. It wasn't right of them to cast their duties aside and oppress those below them.

Of course, not all nobles behaved that way. However, that probably wasn't at all clear from the position of those lower in the hierarchy, such as Tomas. Having been victimized by an oppressive noble in the past, he likely wouldn't agree with me if I said so.

And so society was divided into nobles and commoners—even though neither was supposed to exist without the other.

"I'm not saying nobles ought to live like us," Tomas said. "I've seen how you lot live, and I understand… You've got your own problems, don't you?"

"I…can't say it's always easy," I answered, flashing him a bitter smile.

Maybe I had let my own pain show a little, as a touch of sympathy entered Tomas's gaze. "The same goes for me, so let's both take responsibility… Anyway, that isn't what I wanted to talk about. Right, Lady Anis. She's a reliable one, and I'm sure I'm not the only one who thinks so. We could trust her, if she was to rule as queen."

"…But you don't sound very happy about it," I pointed out.

Tomas let out a deep sigh through his nose. Relaxing, he fixed me with a faint smile and shook his head. "…You noticed? Well, you're right. I'm not pleased, not really."

"Why not?"

"She probably *could* be queen, but she isn't really cut out for ruling."

Tomas's words left me utterly shocked. Something about his comment struck a chord inside me.

I swallowed, saliva building up in my mouth. After a moment, I turned back to him to confirm the reason for my apprehension. "You don't think Lady Anis is suited to be queen? I know she doesn't like to abide by the usual conventions, but—"

Tomas interrupted me there, his next words sending a chill running through my chest. "No, that isn't what I mean… It would be too much of a burden on her shoulders."

It was certainly true that Lady Anis had a strong sense of responsibility. That was clear enough from everything she had done

for me, Lainie, and even Prince Algard. As Tomas said, she was sincere when it came to wanting to improve people's lives and circumstances.

"But isn't that a good quality to have in a leader?" I asked. "If it's too much for her alone, her vassals will surely help her to shoulder the weight…"

"That's not it. Like I said, she *could* be a great a ruler, and some parts of the job would fit her well, but don't you think she'd be better suited to something else?"

I tensed. "Well…"

I couldn't deny that. In my view, Lady Anis did have the qualities of a good queen. Nonetheless, I also knew she didn't want the throne. Her real desire was to devote her life to the study of magic—or strictly speaking, to magicology.

However, whether she actually wanted it or not, she had been born the daughter of a king, and she was now the only heir capable of inheriting the throne… That was what it meant to be royalty.

Tomas's next words shook me to my core.

"It's one thing to have the ability to do a job—it's something else entirely to be forced to do it."

I felt as though I had been hit over the head with a blunt object. I almost fell out of my chair from vertigo—but I clenched my fists and mustered my voice. "…But she has a responsibility. To the nobility. To the royal family…"

"Even so, there's no precedent in this kingdom for a woman to rule as queen in her own name, is there? Does she really need to carry that torch? It would be nice if she could keep on doing her magicology research even after becoming queen, but that's pure fantasy, right? She ought to have been able to come here much sooner to pick up your sword, shouldn't she have?"

Tomas was right, of course. Lady Anis had been so busy lately that she hadn't had any time to focus on magicology. Considering how busy she would no doubt be from here on out, all the preparations, all the studying that she would have to do to understand political affairs and be a good ruler, would she really have enough time to spend on her own research?

And if she *was* forced to give up her magicology research, was

there anyone else capable of picking up where she left off? Maybe I could help share her magical tools with the world, but could I come up with any new ideas by myself?

When I stopped to think about it, she really was one of a kind when it came to magicology. At the same time, she was one of a kind as a member of the royal family.

I could see no way of reconciling those two positions. Any attempt would certainly take a tremendous amount of effort. Even I could see that.

"If she was to become queen…she would lose her freedom," Tomas observed. "It would smother her unique charms. She wouldn't be able to come here anymore, either."

"Well…"

"She might act wild and unpredictable at times, but she knows what she's doing. She wouldn't come this way again if she became queen—at least not as just *Lady* Anis."

"…You know her well, don't you?" I murmured.

Tomas wore a complicated expression, simultaneously both of embarrassment and discomfiture. Once more, he raised a hand to scratch at his face. "She hasn't changed since she was a little child… Ah, maybe that's why. Maybe I'm just worried she'll end up turning into something else. She's always so brilliant when she comes here. We all sympathized with her, with her inability to use magic. We had high expectations for her. After all, she listened to us, and she told us about her own hopes and dreams…"

"…I'm sure that won't change even if she does become queen."

"She won't, but she'll have people around her to contend with and appease. Will they let her keep acting the same?"

They wouldn't. I certainly couldn't deny that. If she became queen, there were so many simple joys that would be denied to her.

Yes, it would drive a wedge between her and the commoners. A queen was obliged to act as such, to lead her people. That was her duty.

But that would also mean giving up her freedom. There could be no denying that outcome. And it wasn't difficult to imagine her smothering her own heart to become queen for all the right reasons.

That was precisely the sort of thing she might do. From an objective point of view, her accension to the throne might indeed prove inevitable. Even so…

Tomas's next question threatened to knock the air from my

chest.

"If she does become queen, would that really make her happy?"

For all that I had pretended not to see, I knew it was true.

Hadn't I witnessed it with my own two eyes? But what good did it do to know how powerless you were to prevent someone whom you cared about from being overwhelmed by the reality of their unfulfilled dreams?

That word, *queen*, meant a future in which Lady Anis would be robbed of happiness. It was nothing less than a curse.

What would it mean, to offer her my support? Because my support was my only way of protecting her. I had forced myself to believe her becoming queen was the right thing to do.

Once again, that sentiment cut deep into my being…

"…H-hey…"

Tomas's flustered voice brought my attention to the tears on my face. As soon as I realized it for myself, tears spilled from my eyes, like a dam bursting.

When exactly had I started feeling this urge to weep? I didn't know, but I didn't want him to hear any more of this, so I hugged my body with my arms.

"Look after my sister for me."

I'm sorry, Prince Algard. I'm completely useless…

In the end, I was nothing more than a nobleman's daughter. For all that people called me a genius, I didn't have the power to change anything.

I could understand his feelings so painfully now. Even if it meant destroying the whole world to make my wish come true, I might actually do it.

…And yet I was still Euphyllia Magenta, daughter of Duke Magenta, and I had no choice but to conduct myself accordingly.

That was why I had to help Lady Anis become queen. For the sake of the realm. What a terrible contradiction!

This dreadful reality—that I was only capable of living within the bounds of what was expected of me—had been thrust before me. I didn't know whether to feel sad, frustrated, or angry. All I could do was let out a deep moan as I fought to hold back my raging emotions.

* * *

After that, the atmosphere became too delicate for Tomas and me to resume our conversation.

I didn't want Lady Anis to see me like this, so after calming down, I went to wash my face. I even cast a self-healing spell just in case.

By the time I had made sure the swelling in my eyes had subsided and made myself presentable, Lady Anis had already returned. She and Tomas exchanged a few final words, and we left the Gana Armory without further ado.

As I walked the streets of the castle town, I nibbled at the unfamiliar food that Lady Anis had bought from one of the street stalls. I wasn't used to eating with my hands, so it was taking me a little time to work my way through it.

In essence, it was a thin bread dough with various ingredients sandwiched in between, and I had to take small bites to prevent the filling from spilling out. As she watched me eat, Lady Anis let out a small chuckle, as though she found the sight vaguely amusing.

Embarrassed, I continued to focus on the food. So this was what commoners ate.

It was messier albeit tastier than my usual cuisine, but it was still strangely appetizing. I couldn't exactly say whether I liked it, but it was certainly different from what I usually consumed, so the word *fresh* seemed to fit.

After finishing the last bite, I turned my gaze to the town. I could easily hear the lively voices of the townspeople. It had been a while since I had last visited this area, although I had always passed through by horse-drawn carriage in the past.

As such, this was my first time taking in the scenery as I strolled the streets on my own two feet. I was absolutely fascinated by it all.

"So what did Tomas have to say?"

"Gah! Ahem…!"

That was when Lady Anis stared into my eyes, asking a question that made me flinch. I almost yelped from the sheer force of her look, and I had to stop myself by thumping my chest a few times.

Lady Anis rushed to rub my back as my consciousness gradually returned.

"A-are you all right?"

"…I'm fine. You wanted to know what Tomas asked me, yes? Nothing in particular. We just made small talk."

"Oh? You seemed a little absent-minded. I was worried about you."

"Well…"

I thought about what Tomas had said to me—about how, to Lady Anis, the prospect of becoming queen must have seemed like a curse.

But she was royalty, I had insisted. That response had come so easily. There weren't any other suitable heirs to take the throne. And no doubt the situation would be completely different again if she might be able to marry someone suitable.

…No, I corrected myself. In the end, it would be exactly the same. The curse that had been placed upon her was none other than a yoke on her freedom.

Everyone was shackled by something, to one extent or another. Yet for her, the thrall of royalty was too much for her unique talents. I didn't want to force that on her.

And that was why I couldn't say anything. Because she understood her situation better than anyone. If I put those fears into words, they would break her. She already harbored such doubts.

Because that was who she was. So in the end, I couldn't tell her the truth.

"…Tomas seemed worried that you wouldn't be able to visit him for a while, Lady Anis."

"Hmm. There you go with the titles again."

"…I beg your pardon."

"Apologies won't quite cut it!" she answered, beaming with joy.

I couldn't help but stare back in blank surprise. How could she be so happy? She had been kept so busy lately. She didn't have any

time to spare for her magicology research. She'd been forced to meet with nobles day after day.

So I had to wonder—was this smile real? Might she not be harboring secret worries, struggling behind the scenes?

I didn't know. I couldn't comprehend just how much she was suffering.

…Maybe Tilty noticed. That might explain why she got so angry.

Thinking back to Tilty's furious reaction the other day, I was convinced that my guess had hit the mark—and that realization sent a stabbing pain coursing through my chest, digging deeper and deeper until it was a gaping wound in my heart.

When I grimaced in pain, Lady Anis called out to me, resting a hand on my cheek. "Euphie?"

"…I— I'm terribly sorry."

"You're being very formal all of a sudden."

"U-um, ah, y-you don't need to pinch my cheek…! Ah!"

She had grabbed my face with both hands, pulling on my cheeks. I managed to wriggle free, but I couldn't stop the wave of exhaustion from rising up inside me.

Lady Anis let out a sigh, and her next words froze me to the spot. "This is just the way things are. Now that Allie's gone, it's *my* job to step up. I have to."

I stopped in my tracks and stared into her eyes. Did she know what I was really thinking? Yet gazing back at me was her usual untroubled, smiling face.

It was the exact same expression she had worn in front of Tilty the other day—and that realization made me bite my lips in worry.

She was smiling. But if it *was* a false smile, then in truth…

"I've had a long time to get used to inevitabilities like this. Complaining won't change anything. And *someone* needs to be the next ruler, right? For the kingdom. For the people."

I couldn't stand to hear any more. "…Are you certain of that, Lady Anis?" I asked.

I already knew what she would say in response. I knew it would only hurl her deeper into the throes of her curse.

The faint smile she flashed me in return was flawless—beautiful, in fact. "Not really. But like I said, *someone* has to do it."

She spoke in her usual tone of voice, leaving me unable to formulate a response. Never before had I felt so unworthy, so unable to speak up.

In the first place, I had no answer to give her. All I had done was offer words that only served to further bind her.

I was useless, pathetic, and filled to bursting with frustration and pain. I was biting my lips so hard that I almost tore them clean off.

Yet Lady Anis took my hand, her voice clear and bright. “I don’t care about any of that, so let’s just explore the town. This is the best part of going incognito!”

With those words, she tugged at my hand, and we took off running. I tightened my grip around hers, holding on firmly so as not to crumple to the ground.

She was always like this—wild, free, doing whatever and going wherever she wanted, even when it was painful or unhappy. And then she would find a solution as time passed.

If I hadn’t held on, I would have been left behind. I tightened my grip, praying that she wouldn’t leave me.

“…Lady Anis…,” I called out, hoping to say something, yet my words failed to take form and drifted away as a mere sigh.

There was something I had to know for sure, but I couldn’t form the question clearly in my mind.

“Don’t worry, Euphie. See? I’m fine with it.”

Lady Anis, seeing through my unfinished murmur, let out a laugh, all but declaring that everything would be well.

Yes, she was the same as ever. She always spoke so selflessly.

Yet her gesture left me feeling uncomfortable. I couldn’t afford to overlook it—but I couldn’t even say what exactly I was overlooking.

Please, let me understand. Never before had I been in such desperate need of an answer. *Please, please, tell me. I don’t know what to do…*

CHAPTER 3

A few days after our surreptitious excursion to the castle town, Queen Sylphine invited me to attend a private tea party at the royal castle.

I had assumed she would summon Lady Anis as well, but she was nowhere to be seen. As such, this little tea party in the garden outside the royal palace was comprised of me, the queen, and Lainie, who had come as my attendant.

Lainie, standing behind me, was clearly nervous to find herself in the presence of the queen. Her Majesty didn't seem to mind, however, and greeted me amicably, "How are you, Euphyllia?"

"I'm quite well, thank you."

The queen nodded in satisfaction at my response, but I could see that she looked somewhat tired. There was little wonder. Apparently, ever since the incident with Prince Algard, she had retired from her diplomatic responsibilities and was busying herself trying to mend the kingdom's domestic affairs.

At present, the nobles of the kingdom were in a state of heightened activity. After all, Prince Algard, who was supposed to one day accede to the throne as king, had been disinherited, with Lady Anis becoming first in the line of succession.

According to Ilia, those who had treated her coldly up till now had yet to decide how best to approach this change of fortunes, with some beginning to start currying favor, while others were waiting to see how things developed.

There also seemed to be some talk about finding a suitable consort for Lady Anis, but she herself had once declared that she had no intention to ever marry.

Given the present situation, such a declaration was bound to make waves among the nobility. It might have ultimately stemmed from uncertainty about the future, but when I turned my mind over her constant heartache, I couldn't help but reel with indignation at it all.

"…And how is Anis, Euphyllia?" the queen asked after a short pause.

"…How is she?" Unsure how to reply, I tried sounding out the

meaning behind her open-ended question.

She wasn't usually one to show anything other than a dignified demeanor, yet she looked worn out, even fatigued. Her voice as she asked about her daughter was weak, a hint of hesitation washing across her face. "I know the situation has changed a little for her, but has *she* changed?"

"…Well, I think she's much the same as usual. But I do think she's more aware that she'll need to focus on politics in the future."

"I see. Do you think she's unhappy?"

"…I couldn't say…"

Was the queen worried about Lady Anis, or was she trying to find fault? Either way, there wasn't a whole lot I could tell her. Even if I did think she was dissatisfied with her current situation, I couldn't comment on the level of her unhappiness.

Lately, it had become even more difficult to read Lady Anis's inner feelings than it had been before. So in the end, I could offer only the vaguest of responses.

The queen let out a deep sigh as I gave her my answer. She did nothing to conceal her exhaustion. She was so dejected that I found myself worrying about *her* health.

"…I see. I wanted to speak to you about her today. Lainie, please, you should take a seat, too."

"Huh?! B-but I'm just…" Lainie, standing behind me, was flustered by this sudden instruction.

The queen winced before continuing. "This tea party is really just a pretext. I wanted to speak to you both, seeing as you're the ones she keeps at her side. I asked Marquis Claret's daughter to join us, too, but she declined."

"L-Lady Tilty turned down Your Majesty's invitation?!" Lainie exclaimed.

While I hadn't spoken aloud, I was just as shocked as she was. It was unheard of for a noblewoman to refuse an invitation from the queen, but I could imagine Tilty doing just that. I pictured it so clearly. I felt a headache coming on…

"It is what it is… It appears she isn't particularly fond of me."

"…Technically, I think there are very few people she *is* fond of…"

"Oh-ho… Yes, that's one way of looking at it. Lainie, do you dislike me, too? I couldn't blame you if you're afraid of me."

"N-not at all!"

“Then, please, take a seat. Think of me today not as your queen, but as Anis’s mother. And I would like to speak to you as her confidant, if you’re all right with that?”

Faced with the queen’s calm tone of voice, Lainie finally relented, sitting on the indicated chair as though she didn’t possess the will to resist.

Once Lainie was fully seated, the queen continued. “Anis is exerting herself considerably as of late. It’s enough to make one doubt her past inaction. Although I have to admit…I’m a little puzzled by the change.”

“It *is* perplexing, given how she has been up till now…,” I admitted.

“Indeed. From the very day she first declared her wish to give up the throne, I’ve been unable to think of her as just a daughter. I thought perhaps a respite might give her an opportunity to grow.” The queen shook her head, her expression clouding with anguish. “Maybe that was the wrong decision. I find it difficult to understand what goes on in her mind now.”

“…There’s one part of her that I think everyone can understand,” I remarked.

“If you’ve noticed it, too, maybe it’s intentional?” the queen murmured, sending a cold shiver through me. It was the same feeling I’d gotten from speaking to Tomas about Lady Anis.

“…Intentional?”

She placed a hand on her forehead and sighed before continuing. “It’s true that she has some outlandish thoughts and a wild personality, but she understands her own nature and knows how to project a certain impression. So I can never tell if I’m looking at her true self.”

“Your Highness…”

The queen spoke sadly, looking frailer than ever before. This wasn’t the face of a royal but of a private woman, clearly communicating her pain as the mother of her child.

“To be frank, I expected her to object to this arrangement. She has always insisted that she didn’t want to inherit the throne. Now that she’s actually behaving like royalty, I have no idea what she’s really thinking. I’m worried, which is why I wanted to speak with both of you. I even asked Orphans about it, but, well…”

“…What did His Majesty say?”

“…To leave it be. That I shouldn’t get involved.”

Could His Majesty have really said that…? But why? And to the queen, no less. I was sure that Lady Anis felt no animosity toward her mother. She seemed ill-equipped to deal with her at times, yes, but she certainly wouldn't resent the queen for worrying about her.

…But in that case, why? If Lady Anis understood her mother's true feelings, it would surely worry her sick.

An image flashed through my mind, of Lady Anis repeating to herself that everything would be fine, forcing a laugh as she unwillingly bit her lip.

"…How is Anis lately? How has she been spending her time, as far as you both can tell?"

"…She often says there's no helping her situation," I explained. "I'm sure she's unhappy about it all. But even so, she's certain she'll be made queen, even if that prospect is like ice in her heart. But she'll do it, if she has to. Although I doubt she'll like it."

The queen let out a long, heavy sigh. Her face, until now filled with anguish, revealed a hint of regret, and her shoulders slumped as far as they could go. "…I've failed my children. I didn't raise them properly. Algard succumbed to despair and ended up harboring treacherous thoughts. Anis's wisdom has prompted her to smother her own heart… No, as a member of the royal family, that's an admirable quality. Unfortunately, it will destroy everything she's worked so hard to develop."

The most essential quality of a royal ruler was fairness and impartiality. The less that one had in the way of individual feelings, the better they would be to serve as king or queen because that was what it took to guide one's people.

…I was well aware that that burden would be too heavy for Lady Anis. She had tasted freedom and had a dream of her own—which meant that the bonds of her royal duties would be all the more suffocating.

"I wonder what I should say to her? I can only relate to her in my capacity as queen. I'm laughable."

"Not at all! Lady Anis doesn't see you like that!" I couldn't help but raise my voice to protest the queen's self-deprecation.

Her eyes widened in surprise, so I must have startled her by speaking so forcefully. Her expression just now was so similar to Lady Anis's—and that contrast made me feel like breaking down in tears all over again. They really were mother and child.

"I'm sorry… I suppose I'm trying to hold myself together, too,"

she said. She was being self-deprecating again, implying she had become weak and fragile.

I held my silence as the queen fixed me with a tired smile. I couldn't do anything for Lady Anis—and that bitter feeling of helplessness continued to spread through my heart.

At that moment, Lainie stood up from the seat beside me. "Your Highness," she began, "with all due respect, what are your plans after this?"

"Hmm? I'll need to return to work."

"In that case, please use this tea party as an opportunity to relax. If you like, could I take a look at you with my powers?"

"…You can do that?"

"I'm still learning how to master them through trial and error… but I may be able to offer you some comfort," Lainie declared, her eyes aglow with determination. A mysterious shimmer had taken root in those crimson eyes, proof of her vampire heritage.

The queen stared back, eyebrows raised in surprise. Lainie's vampire powers were so powerful that, used without caution, they could end up changing the future of entire nations. It was natural to be wary.

"…What on earth are you proposing?"

"Lady Anis taught me how to do this. She said I should be able to use my abilities to relieve people's emotional distress."

"…So you're suggesting you use your vampiric charm abilities, your powers of hypnosis, on me?"

"If you'll offer me your trust, I'll do everything I can as a friend of Lady Anis."

The queen's eyes opened wider still at Lainie's confident words, before she cast her head downward in hesitation. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of silence, she glanced back up, nodded, and made firm eye contact with Lainie. "…Very well. I do need to ascertain the potency of your abilities. Allow me to experience them for myself."

Lainie tensed for a moment in nervousness, but she quickly flashed the older woman a smile and moved to kneel by her side. Taking the queen's hand in her own, she asked, "Your Highness, is Lady Anis the cause of your distress?"

"Yes, I suppose she is. I'm constantly worrying about her."

"Because she never shows her true feelings?"

The queen tensed a little at Lainie's question. She shook her

head, as though to dispel her hesitation before finally nodding. "…It scares me that I can never tell what she's thinking."

"Yes. In that case, look into my eyes… Your fears are unfounded. Lady Anis has immense respect for you, Your Highness. She's learned from you what it means to be royalty. She's simply walking a different path to the road that she's grown accustomed to, so she's trying to be more mindful."

"…Is that so?" The queen's eyelids gradually lowered as Lainie spoke, and her eyes began to soften.

I was about to interject, to ask if she was all right, when Lainie raised a finger to her lips, motioning me to remain silent.

Once she was sure I wouldn't interrupt, Lainie continued, her voice gentle as though singing a lullaby. "When everything settles down, Lady Anis will propose a policy to encourage her study of magicology. That way, she'll still be the same old Lady Anis. Close your eyes—try to picture it."

The queen shut her eyes as suggested, her muscles softening in a relaxed smile. "…Yes, you're right. That *would* be very much like her…"

"And wouldn't Lady Anis turn to you for advice on how far she will be able to go? Picture it—she'll say something completely out of the blue, with a brilliant smile."

"Oh-ho… I can see it well…"

"Yes. You may feel like you're in a daze right now, Your Highness, but release your doubts, relax. When Lady Anis comes to you with one of her ridiculous ideas, how will you respond?"

"First…I'll hear her out… I'll try to understand her thoughts…" In a dreamlike state, the queen spun out a sequence of words one after the other—when all of a sudden, her whole body shook. "Anis… I can't… I can't reach out…"

A solitary tear spilled from the queen's closed eyes, and she slumped back in her chair, sound asleep.

Lainie, until now watching on intently, breathed a deep sigh, her strength leaving her. Beads of sweat had formed on her forehead.

"…Lainie," I asked. "What did you do just now?"

"I dulled the pain in her heart. If I pushed it too hard, the suggestion would be imprinted too deep, so I simply encouraged her to dream," Lainie replied, adjusting the queen's position on the chair to make her more comfortable. "The suggestion will disappear

when she wakes up, but I wanted to give her happy dreams, so her mind and body can rest."

Hypnotic suggestion was a characteristic ability of vampires—and she had used it, she said, to relieve the queen's heartache and to grant her peaceful dreams. Was this what Lady Anis had had in mind when she suggested that Lainie's abilities could have positive applications?

"…When did you learn to do all that?"

"I asked Ilia to help me during my day off… I wanted to help Lady Anis, but it didn't work."

"…Did you try?"

"I think it was because of the dragon qualities of her Impressed Seal. The suggestion didn't hold."

"I see… But still, compared to you, I really can't do anything for her at all."

I clenched my fists, filled with self-loathing; while Lainie had found a way to help those around her, I was completely useless.

Yet Lainie tilted her head to one side. "Huh…?" she exclaimed. "But I suppose Lady Anis is overly protective of you, Lady Euphyllia."

"…Do you think so?" I asked.

"Lady Anis dotes on those close to her, no? And I think she's particularly sensitive when it comes to you."

"That's… Yes, I suppose so. There *was* the incident with Prince Algard, I mean."

"I think Lady Anis tries to avoid talking about politics with you. I don't know enough to really comment myself, but if anyone can offer her advice, it's you, don't you think?"

"…Me?"

"I think you're the one she trusts most, Lady Euphyllia. She loves her parents, of course, but there's a sharp difference when it comes to you, I think…"

"But Ilia has been with her a lot longer than I have, no?" I asked, not entirely convinced.

Yet Lainie shook her head. "Actually, Ilia said it's precisely *because* she's been with Lady Anis so long that she can't stop her. And given her personality, Lady Anis wouldn't stop even if Ilia suggested it."

Lainie and Ilia seemed to be closer than I had expected. Certainly, even if she wanted to share her opinion, I doubted that

the older lady-in-waiting would be able to directly oppose anything that Lady Anis had set her mind on.

"…But why me?" I asked.

"This is just my opinion, but I think Lady Anis sees you as her equal."

"Her equal?"

"My position is too low, and Ilia has been Lady Anis's servant for so long that they can't see each other in any other way. And of course, she holds His Majesty and Her Highness at a certain distance, too. I don't think she has many prospective partners with whom she can really discuss things."

"…So that's it?"

"I've lived my whole live fretting over what people think of me, so I can tell when someone is worried. Although that sensitivity could also be a vampire trait, I suppose." Lainie paused for a moment, embarrassed, before continuing: "Lady Anis has a soft spot for those she cares about, and she doesn't easily let people in, but I think she'll do anything to protect those she *does* let in."

"…Now that you mention it, I think you're right."

I had no idea what would have become of us without Lady Anis's protection.

She had accepted us, had treated us with kindness and love. It was because she knew herself so well that she didn't easily let others get close.

"Out of all of us, I think you're the closest to being her equal," Lainie said.

"…She's helped me so much, yet I haven't done anything for her. We're hardly on equal footing."

"Maybe that's because you spent so long helping her, no?"

"I—I did…?"

"Her current circumstances aside, I think it's thanks to you that she was able to be the person who she really wanted to be, without having to worry about any royal duties. She could rest easy, because she knew you were there to support Prince Algard. I'm sure that's why she wants so badly to spare you from any more hardship, Lady Euphyllia."

"That's… I understand that, but even so, I… I…!"

It made sense, at some level—but I couldn't accept it. Far from supporting Prince Algard, I had succeeded only in inflicting greater anguish, which had in turn caused him irreparable harm. That had

been my responsibility, not Lady Anis's.

Yet as I rued my inattention, Lainie took my hand in her own and gave it a gentle squeeze. There was a hint of anger in her expression as she stared across at me. "Don't put all the blame on your own shoulders… You'll make me feel too ashamed."

"…Ah… I'm sorry, Lainie."

"Lady Anis told me to accept it, that she has no choice in the matter, that regardless of the outcome, nothing would erase what she and everyone else has done," Lainie said, caressing my hand. "I think she's only willing to take the throne now because she knows how much effort you put into becoming queen. So maybe she thinks it's her turn to help you, don't you think?"

Was she suffering because she had spent so long living the way she wanted? Was she now doubly intent on fulfilling her responsibilities because *I* had dedicated myself for so long?

In that case, could I afford to live freely now? But I had no idea what I wanted out of freedom. I didn't have the faintest clue what I should do with it.

No, I couldn't be like Lady Anis. What *could* I possibly to do be considered her equal?

Should I tell her all this, even though I was merely on the receiving end of her protection without giving anything back? But what exactly did I even want to tell her? I couldn't begin to imagine.

Later, the queen gradually awoke from her slumber, and the tea party came to a close.

Once she was up and about, the queen stopped to ask Lainie whether she could call on her again in the future—a request that put Lainie in a remarkable fluster.

That sight left such a vivid impression. Yes, I would have to start searching in earnest for what I could do. I needed to find *something*.

Magical talent alone wasn't enough. Nor was a strong educational background. I was missing something, something that I could proudly declare as my own reason for existing.

If I couldn't find it…I would never be able to move forward.

* * *

“Euphie? You’re drifting away again.”

“Huh…? Ah… I’m sorry, Mother.”

I had let myself get distracted with memories of the past, and my mother, sitting directly across from me, couldn’t fail to notice that my mind was wandering.

Today was a holiday, so I had returned to my family home to visit my parents. My mother invited me to join her for tea, but I was unable to give her my full attention.

“I’ve never seen you so absent-minded over tea. Maybe I’m not a good enough conversation partner?” she teased.

“…I’m sorry.”

“I’m not scolding you, Euphie. Although, if you were still Prince Algard’s fiancée and our future queen, I suppose I might.”

Her jocular words only increased the weight I felt on my shoulders.

Without warning, she sat up straight, her expression tightening. “If you’re worried about something, you can confide in me, you understand? You’ve never turned to me for support before, but it’s never too late to start.”

“…Mother,” I answered, correcting my own posture.

“You’re just like your father, Euphie. To an outside observer, you both look so capable—but inside, you’re both rather clumsy. What’s troubling you?”

Faced with my mother’s kind words, I placed my hands in my lap and began to share my thoughts. “I’ve realized just how inadequate and helpless I am, and it makes me feel so incompetent. I know I can’t go on like this, but I just don’t know what else to do…”

“I see… You’re my pride and joy, Euphie, my perfect daughter… And you’ve hit a wall now for the first time in your life. But is that really all there is to it?”

“…Huh?”

“I *am* your mother, you know? *Why* are you so worried about finding something to do…? Is it because there’s someone else involved, maybe?”

My heart all but leaped from my chest. She had hit the nail on the head.

Paying my chagrin no heed, she continued. “When you were engaged to Prince Algard, you did anything and everything that was asked of you. You have talent, and you were uniquely suited to

everyone's expectations, which is why you never stumbled."

It was certainly true that I had never suffered when I had lived my life hoping to fulfill what everyone requested of me. I couldn't say that it hadn't been difficult at times, painful even, but I had never been at my wit's end, had never felt such a desperate need to escape. I was actually suffering more these days.

"You've changed, Euphie."

"…I have?"

"Before Prince Algard broke off your engagement, and you went to live with Princess Anisphia, I had never seen you look so alive. I think your transformation is thanks to her influence. She's unconventional and doesn't let common sense hold her back. Rather, she's more than happy to rewrite orthodox rules. Maybe she's the one you're worried about?"

"…Yes."

"You're allowed to rely on your parents, every now and then, you know? So tell me, what's bothering you? You'll feel better if you talk about it."

I could feel my heart constricting as my mother's gentle words sank in. My breath caught in my throat, and I could tell that my expression had become tense.

A seed of doubt took root inside me. Could I really afford to share these feelings? Yet my mother's eyes as she waited for me to speak were so kind, so tender.

Faced with that generous gaze, my conflicted feelings finally congealed into the softest of voices. "I want to help Lady Anis, I really do… I don't want her to suffer, I don't want to see her so sad…but I can't do anything. That's why it hurts so much."

"Oh, but there's so much you can do. You aren't one not to notice those things, Euphie. So something tells me that isn't the root of your troubles. What do you *really* want? Because it's an unfulfilled desire that's really bothering you, isn't it?"

Was I suffering because of such a thing? But if so, what exactly did I want so much? I realized at once that the hope emerging from that question was something I could never afford to speak out loud.

I covered my mouth with my hands—and before I knew it, my mother reached out to me.

"Euphie," she said.

"…Mother."

She slowly caressed my head, as though trying to prompt me to

spit out the words I was stubbornly holding back.

The warmth of her gentle hand sent tears streaking down my cheeks—and with that, as though spitting out blood, my true thoughts began to emerge: “Mother… I… I don’t want Lady Anis to be queen…”

As the daughter of a nobleman in the service of the royal family, as the former fiancée of Prince Algard, I had no right to give voice to this wish—but it was the pure, unadulterated truth.

No matter how much I tried to support her, I knew more than anyone else just how much Lady Anis didn’t want to inherit the throne. And I could also see the magnitude of her suffering from the burden that had been placed on her.

But at the same time, I had caused that burden to befall her—all because I had been unable to support Prince Algard when he had most needed it. That was the cause of everything. Just thinking about it left me feeling so unworthy and frustrated that I almost broke down in tears again.

Lainie had said that Lady Anis and I were on equal footing. There was no way I could accept that.

My mistakes were hurting Lady Anis now. This was all because I couldn’t play the role that was granted to me.

After everything that had brought us to this point, what right did I have to insist that I didn’t want Lady Anis to become queen? But all the same, I couldn’t stomach the idea of the person who had saved me from suffering accepting a position she didn’t even want.

Before I knew it, tears were flowing down my cheeks. I burst into long, racking sobs. My mother held me in a warm hug, patting my head with her hand, as though I was but a small child.

“That might not be an appropriate wish for a young noblewoman,” she said. “But it *is* your wish. You don’t want Princess Anisphia to take the throne. However, it’s a wish that can’t be fulfilled. It’s the thought that you don’t feel worthy enough to harbor that wish that hurts so much, isn’t it?”

“…Mother.”

“Your pain is our responsibility as well, you know?” my mother said as she held my head. Her voice flowed effortlessly, reaching deep into my heart. “Princess Anisphia has already wrought great

change, for better or for worse. Not even King Orphans and Queen Sylphine can undo her influence now. So what is there to be done? There's no reversing what's happened, no second chances."

"I know… That's why I shouldn't even harbor this one wish…!" I whispered, unable to conceal the trembling in my voice.

My mother let me go, adjusting her posture as she placed her hands on my shoulders. "…Euphie, *you* are the great talent, the genius prodigy, that the royal family hoped to court. We're so very proud of you. Whichever path you decide to take moving forward, as your mother, I will support you no matter what."

"…Mother?"

"Your father always endeavors to live a righteous life as the head of the House of Magenta. But that isn't necessarily the right decision. Perfection doesn't shield you from the envy of outsiders. Yet even so, he's always wanted for you to live an upstanding life as well. That's the kind of man he is."

To my mother, my father was indeed a righteous man. As a duke, one of the foremost nobles in the kingdom, his pride demanded strict discipline. Thus, as his daughter, I had always endeavored to be the person he wanted me to be, modeling myself after him. I had been convinced that that was the path I would take.

But I couldn't, not anymore.

Would righteousness be enough to save Lady Anis? What was the point of living a just life if it meant oppressing yourself to save others?

My thoughts were getting me nowhere, when my mother called out, her voice gentle yet firm. "Find your own path, the path you want to take. You don't have all the time in the world, but use the time you do have to scramble for a foothold, to think, and to make your decision. Even if it isn't the kind of wish you might think worthy of a noblewoman, if it's something you can't possibly give up on, hold firmly to it. You don't want Lady Anis to take the throne, do you?"

"…Is that a wish I ought not to have?" I asked fearfully.

My mother relaxed her expression. "It isn't good, no. However, if you set your mind on something, there are very few in this world who will be able to stop you. You have the power to bring about change—because you are *our* daughter."

With a smile, she pressed her forehead up against mine. As I felt her warmth comfort me, I began to ponder.

I didn't want Lady Anis to take the throne. That was my fervent wish.

Having been raised as the daughter of a nobleman, part of me wanted to reject this desire that I knew shouldn't be entertained. And yet I could do nothing to clear Lady Anis's radiant smile from my mind.

When Prince Algard had turned on me without reason, had broken off our betrothal, she hadn't hesitated to extend her hand.

After my arrival at the detached palace, she had reached out to me so intimately that I hadn't known how to respond. Before I even recognized what had happened, her unreserved cheer had saved my soul.

She seemed so happy when we talked about magic and our dreams, her joy welling up from the very bottom of her heart.

I had only known her for a short time, but she had become an indispensable part of my life—and of my heart, too.

I wanted nothing more than to protect that peerless, unblemished smile of hers. If there was a path that might lead to my wish coming true, it was up to me to find it…

I clenched my hands, shaking with anxiety as I stood in front of my father's office.

I felt awkward reaching out to him like this, seeing as he had ventured to the royal castle even though it was a holiday, and he had been holed up in his office since dinner.

Still, I couldn't go on as things were. If I was to have any hope of finding a new path to tread, I would first need to bring him around to my way of thinking.

Concentrating my resolve, I took a deep breath before knocking on the heavy door.

"Enter," echoed his voice from inside.

With a swallow, I nudged open the door.

My father, sitting at his desk, raised his eyebrows in a frown when he saw me but quickly put down his pen before turning to address me. "It's rare of you to come all the way to my office, Euphie."

"I'm sorry to bother you at this late hour, Father, but I was wondering if I could have a moment of your time?" My fists were still clenched shut with all my strength in a desperate attempt to calm my trembling body.

My father looked away for a second before standing up from his seat. "Sit down," he said, gesturing to the nearby sofa set aside for visitors.

Once we were seated across from one another on either side of the sofa table, he spoke up again, addressing me with a simple question: "What brings you here today?"

His eyes were probing, but I knew that this expression wasn't unusual for him. Still, just thinking about how this conversation might develop filled me with dread.

"…I've something to discuss with you, Father."

"Oh? That's unusual."

"Father… Does Lady Anis really need to be the next queen?"

That question caused an immediate shift in the room's atmosphere. The air become suddenly tense—I could hardly breathe.

Forcing myself to endure that oppressive feeling, I held my father's gaze for as long as I could. After a short moment, he closed his eyes, looking away.

"Why would you ask that of me?"

"…Because I don't want her to have to become queen."

How would my father react to *this*? With words of rebuke? Or disappointment? I straightened my back, readying myself for his response, no matter what form it took.

There was no change in his expression. I don't know how long we stared at each other, but finally he let out a sigh to break the stomach-churning silence.

"…That's an unusual question. But the real problem is that, apart from Princess Anisphia, there are no other suitable heirs eligible to accede to the throne. Moreover, the conditions for someone else connected to the royal bloodline to inherit are strictly defined. All things considered, she is the only suitable candidate. You must understand that, Euphyllia?"

"…Yes."

"To be clear, if there were another possibility, it would be worth exploring. Up until recently, Prince Algard was heir, but he isn't a viable option anymore. That being the case, I believe the next person who should lead is Princess Anisphia."

I ground my teeth at my father's answer. I couldn't fault his argument, but it wrenched my heart to hear the situation be spelled out so matter-of-factly.

"You say you don't want Princess Anisphia to inherit the throne. Who then, I ask, should? A kingdom needs a ruler. For want of a king or queen, the realm would collapse. Nobles and commoners alike would be stripped of a vital stabilizing influence. We have to avoid that possibility at all costs. To preserve the realm and protect the people—that is our role as the nobility."

My father's words were undeniably true. A kingdom could only exist with a monarch to rule it. That was why *someone* had to inherit the throne—or the Kingdom of Palettia would fall apart.

I also knew it was the royal family who was obligated to bear that burden of responsibility. But even so, Lady Anis's smile, that perfect smile so expertly concealing her true feelings, floated up again in my mind.

"Lady Anis might divide the country. She doesn't have the talents expected of royalty."

“Even so,” my father answered.

“Even so…?” I repeated.

“You must understand, Euphyllia. It has taken a long time, but the realm has grown distorted, warped. It’s only natural to expect a backlash when we try to correct those deformations.”

“…Do you mean the disconnect between the nobility and commoners? Because of people’s faith in spirits?”

“The ability to wield magic has long been regarded as a special privilege of the aristocracy. The blessings of the spirits were essential in the foundation of the Kingdom of Palettia as a nation. Take those beliefs too far, however, and you are bound to repeat the tragedy of our former king.”

“…Do you mean the coup d’état during the reign of Lady Anis’s grandfather?”

“Indeed. That incident almost tore the realm in two, which is why His Majesty has always strove to rule in harmony with his subjects. There can be no denying that the result has been further distortions in the fabric of society. However, it is also true that the people are living now in good health. There may have been ways to counteract the issues affecting society through inflicting further divisions, but His Majesty elected not to pursue that path.”

King Orphans had succeeded in delaying a destructive future, but his efforts hadn’t solved the problems at their root. And those problems still affected us all today.

Lady Anis suffered now due to the special privileges of the aristocracy and the excesses of their spiritualist belief system. Prince Algard had likewise been led astray.

“One could argue that there could have been no avoiding the present outcome. Even if His Majesty…even if Orphans has the power to make peace, he isn’t strong enough to overcome this turmoil. That is why the realm needs Princess Anisphia.”

“…Because Lady Anis is a heretic?”

“A heretic? I suppose so. But what is the fruit of that heresy? It’s only the nobility that views her with hostility. The people at large accept her as she is. She has an innovative spirit that Orphans lacks—the power to lead us all toward a bright future that my generation failed to achieve.”

“…You think very highly of her, don’t you, Father?”

“There are very few individuals who truly scare me, and Princess Anisphia is one of them.”

…*He's afraid of Lady Anis?* I could only stare back at him, wide-eyed.

I was doubly surprised; not only were there people who caused my seemingly fearless father trepidation, but one of them was Lady Anis.

"As I'm sure you know, Princess Anisphia is like a powerful drug. It's best to keep her out of the public eye unless absolutely necessary. She has a tendency to push the pace of progress beyond what the kingdom can bear."

"…In what way?"

"Her magicology is like oil to the water of our homeland's traditional spiritualistic beliefs—they simply won't mix. All the same, the change she brings is precisely what the realm most sorely needs. That is why I recommended her for the throne."

My father leaned back in his sofa, clasped his hands together, and fixed me in his sights, his gaze unwavering. "But Princess Anisphia had no intention of becoming queen, likely because she understood that Prince Algard could fill that role instead. She always was unusually insightful, even as a child. I thought it most unfortunate. So when the royal family asked that you become Prince Algard's future wife, I considered it a vital opportunity."

"An opportunity?"

"Once Algard became king, and you queen, I intended to make you aware of the wider situation and urge you to introduce Princess Anisphia's magicology research throughout the realm. I had hoped to use my influence to back such plans. Moreover, I had expected the prince to favor a harmonious rule much like his father. However, those seeing to his education, in particular those in the Ministry of the Arcane, made sure to suppress any such inclinations. And now we've all seen the end result."

My father spoke plainly, his eyes gently lowered. I was surprised to read exhaustion in his bearing. He never showed even the slightest sign of fatigue; it was a shock to see him so tired.

"None of this developed the way I would have liked. At times, I found myself holding on to a thin thread of hope—if only Princess Anisphia would show an interest in ruling in her own name. But then, I would think to myself, she was too kind to be made queen. Such generosity of spirit can of course work to one's advantage, but it can also be a major weakness. Especially for one who would rule a realm like ours."

“Father…”

“But if there are no alternatives, our only choice is to proceed with the one option available to us. Even if it does ultimately tear the realm in two. At this rate, it’s only a matter of time before the kingdom tears itself apart. It needs *something* to trigger the next stage in its evolution. For that reason, Princess Anisphia simply *must* fulfill her royal duties.” He paused there, his eyes staring straight at me, radiating an unwavering will. “I want Princess Anisphia to reign as queen. That, I believe, is my duty as this kingdom’s foremost noble. So even after hearing me out, will you still seek another path for her besides the throne, Euphyllia?”

“I…”

My father continued to stare my way, his gaze unrelenting. I was forced to look away momentarily. I gritted my teeth and turned back to face him. “If I can find a way, yes. No matter how small the possibility of success…I will keep trying.”

“For what reason?”

“Because there’s something I can’t give up, no matter what.”

I had a wish—not as the daughter of Duke Magenta, but as myself, as the individual Euphyllia Magenta. For that wish, I would keep pushing on until the end.

For the first time ever, my heart was crying out so strongly in desire, in need, telling me not to abandon hope. I could ignore that cry no longer. Even if this course of action was selfish of me, even if it wasn’t befitting of a young noblewoman, even if others spoke out against it.

“Many will be saved if Lady Anis becomes queen, and plenty others will hold ill will against her,” I said. “I don’t know if having her as ruler would ultimately lead to prosperity or ruin—but I am certain about one thing.”

“And what is that?”

“That her *real* smile will be gone forever.”

I would look away from my father no longer. He had declared that he saw it as his duty to help her accede to the throne. No doubt he would admonish me for going against him. Perhaps I would be forced into an unwinnable situation. Even so, if I was to have any chance of instituting change, I first had to bring my father around.

“Princess Anisphia’s smile, you say? Is that…more important than the future of the realm?” he pressed.

“To me, it is! I don’t want her to be forced to do something for

the good of the country!" I brought my hand to my chest as I stared beseechingly into my father's eyes. "The future of the realm weighs more heavily on the scale than a single smile. Still, I can't accept that there are no other options! I can't accept it—which is why I won't give up! Not until I'm convinced for myself that there really is no other way than for her to be queen…! Even if that means I'm not good enough to be a nobleman's daughter…to be your daughter…!"

I was willing to throw away everything I had called mine up till now. My wish was *alive*, and I would risk losing everything—my position, my family—before I gave up on it.

This seed within me had grown so strong that it couldn't be stopped. I wanted it not for anyone else, but for myself—and so there could be no holding it back.

"…Even if it means losing everything?" my father asked softly.

I'd told myself I wouldn't look away, but I finally faltered. He wasn't reproving me, nor was he expressing disappointment. He seemed simply to be accepting what I had said at face value.

"You could well lose it all. Do you care for Princess Anisphia so strongly that you would be willing to go that far?"

"Yes."

"Because of loyalty? Gratitude? Or maybe sympathy? What has inspired this depth of feeling in you?" he murmured in disbelief.

I took the time to collect my breath before looking him straight in the eyes. "Because I cherish her. That's all."

Loyalty, gratitude, sympathy—in their own way, each of those words applied. That was how intricately intertwined my emotions were. That was how much I cherished her. I wanted this with all that I was. I was willing to risk it all.

The first time she extended her hand to me, she offered me a light called *hope* in the midst of a helpless situation. Now I wanted to protect her, she who had spoken so proudly of unknown possibilities.

That was reason enough for me. I had something I needed to protect, something that went beyond logic and reason. I wanted to live freely, the way she had shown me.

My father continued to stare my way, before his expression abruptly softened, and he let out a deep sigh. "…You're a Magenta through and through, I see," he said, before averting his gaze.

"…Huh?"

A Magenta through and through? What was that supposed to

mean?

I tilted my head to one side in bewilderment, when my father continued. “You won’t accept Princess Anisphia acceding to the throne, yes? You say you’ll accept another as ruler, if at all possible, no…? I won’t say there are no other possible candidates.”

“Huh?!”

I was so taken aback by my father’s comment just then that I let out a startled shriek.

There was another potential ruler, one who could save Lady Anis from having to accept the throne?! I could hardly believe what I had just heard; I stared back at my father, wanting to hear more.

“There is one thing expected in a ruler that Princess Anisphia is most certainly lacking.”

“…The gift of magic, you mean?”

“Yes. Maintaining the royal bloodline by right also means maintaining those powers. As such, regardless of her many achievements when it comes to magicology, those who adhere to tradition will never accept her as ruler. One could use that to their advantage, if they were so willing.”

“Use it…to one’s advantage?”

“The royal family exists to inherit the magical gifts of the spirits. In extreme cases, so long as that requirement is fulfilled, it doesn’t matter who sits on the throne. It’s always best to maintain a strong bloodline… But there are ways to overcome questions of legitimacy.”

“There are…?!” I cried out, leaning forward in my chair.

If there *was* an alternative, maybe it wouldn’t be necessary for Lady Anis to become queen. My heart was pounding with anticipation.

“It’s hardly realistic, though.”

“What do you mean, exactly…?”

“If what has been inherited through the ages risks being lost, one can revive it again. Just as the first king of the Kingdom of Palettia did.”

The moment I realized what exactly my father was suggesting, I was at a loss for words. As he had said, it was a fantastical suggestion, completely unrealistic.

My throat tightened. I had to pause for a moment to swallow a mouthful of saliva before I dared respond. “A spirit covenant.”

My father nodded.

A spirit covenant—entering into a direct pact with an Elemental, the greatest and most powerful of all spirits. According to legend, the first king founded the Kingdom of Palettia through

such an event long ago.

It stood to reason that if one were to enter into a new spirit covenant with an Elemental, they could start a new royal lineage. And if Lady Anis acceding to the throne meant the end of this tradition, that was one way of continuing it.

But at the same time, it couldn't be further from the realm of possibility. The truth behind spirit covenants was the most closely guarded of secrets.

Those who had successfully entered into them only showed their faces in society when it suited their own whims, and most kept a wide berth from the mundanities of the world at large. From what I had heard, they were so thorough that they could only be contacted by the royal family itself.

"With the royal family's approval, one who has entered into a spirit covenant could start a new royal lineage. The return of a legend would also go a good way to bringing the nobility around. Especially if the individual in question was related to the present royal family, even if only distantly."

"Y-you don't mean…"

I let out a dull groan, choking on my own words. It didn't take long for the tremors welling up through my clenched fists to turn into a full-body shudder.

My father continued to stare my way. He was sitting just across the table, yet he seemed so terribly distant. As I sat there quivering, he delivered the decisive words.

"If you could enter into a spirit covenant, you could sit on the throne as queen. You could also potentially be adopted into the royal family. You were intended to marry Prince Algard, after all. And you've been fully educated to serve as royalty. There's no one else more suited than you."

Although only distantly related, the dukes of the House of Magenta did have royal blood flowing through their veins. And as my father said, the rebirth of a legendary spirit covenant would bring this farfetched idea within the realm of possibility.

"Are you ready to stand as queen, Euphyllia?"

I couldn't possibly respond to my father's question, so I sat there motionless.

Finally, my father let out a quiet sigh. “Even if you are prepared, it’s not an easy thing to enter into a spirit covenant. But if you aren’t willing to go that far, you have no place trying to deny Princess Anisphia the throne.”

I could only hang my head as the full force of his words hit home.

* * *

Rendered speechless by my father’s gut-wrenching remarks, I left his office and retired to my own room.

Without even changing out of my clothes, I collapsed onto my bed and held my eyes firmly shut. I wasn’t at all sleepy and simply lay there, my thoughts running around in circles.

“…A spirit covenant.”

A legend tied to the kingdom’s very founding. If I could pull off such a feat, I might indeed be able to stand as queen. I had never even considered such a thing before.

My emotions were all over the place, and I had no idea what name to give to the feelings surging up from the depths of my heart. They swept over me relentlessly, denying me sleep, robbing me of my appetite, and draining my energy.

Would I really be able to take Lady Anis’s place as queen? That worry, that tendril of anxiety wrapped itself around my chest. Curling into a ball, I did my best to face those emotions directly.

If I were to become queen regnant…would I even be able to fulfill all the necessary responsibilities?

Ruling as queen in one’s own name was quite different from supporting the king as his wife. The fate of the entire realm would hang on my every decision.

The weight of that burden awakened a feeling of nausea inside me. But when I realized that Lady Anis must be suffering under the same load, my hands began to steady.

She had to be frightened and confused as well. She wouldn’t know what to believe. Just how long had she been curled up in her shell in this way?

Even as I slowly unraveled my emotions, they refused to go away. I almost wished I hadn’t asked about this fleeting possibility.

However, it probably was the best alternative I could think of.

If I became the next queen, I would guarantee Lady Anis's freedom. She wouldn't have to take on the burden of ruling for herself.

Additionally, I could nudge the kingdom in the right direction. I might even be able to propose merging Lady Anis's magicology into conventional magical knowledge. After all, she wanted that more than anything.

If I was to do all that, I would first need to overcome an impossible hurdle—enter into a spirit covenant. In the end, this was probably little more than wishful thinking.

But…what if I could *envision such a future…?*

As I tried to imagine the possibilities, my ears pricked up at a distant sound.

"…A song?"

I sat up, listening carefully. It was a mysterious singing voice and a song I had never heard before—but something about it struck me as unlike a person singing.

I opened my eyes to that strange feeling. The song was perfectly audible despite being so quiet.

"…What is this song…?"

I stood up in the center of the darkened room, guided by the pale moonlight.

Then the light oscillated softly before my very eyes. When I focused my attention on it, I was faced with an unbelievable sight.

It was a person-shaped being shrouded in a veil of light, around the size of my palm, floating in the air with the help of a pair of wings fluttering on its back. I recognized this familiar sensation now for what it was and murmured its name in surprise: "A spirit…?"

The tiny person—the spirit—flashed me a bright smile. But how was it capable of taking on a form like this? Was that expression a sign it had a will of its own?

Confused, I stared across at it—when the spirit, seemingly pleased that I had noticed it, slipped through the window and flew outside.

I opened the window to follow—but it was nowhere to be seen.

"…What *was* that…? No, more importantly…that song…"

The mysterious spirit's sudden appearance was a wondrous thing—but I could still hear the song somewhere in the distance. Where was it coming from? Who or what was singing it?

As though in response to my unasked questions, I noticed a

light dancing off in the garden outside the Magenta residence, in the square beyond my window.

It was the spirit, the same one I had lost sight of moments ago. Even more surprising was that it wasn't alone—there were dozens of lights. In the center of those gathering spirits, illuminated in the moonlight, was a girl.

Her platinum-colored hair, reaching all the way to her knees, gave her the appearance of a fairy-tale sorceress. She appeared to be around my age, and she was the one singing that mysterious song. As she did, the spirits gathered around her, dancing and glowing in the dim light. I was at a loss for words at this fantastic sight—when the girl turned her gaze toward me.

There was still a good distance between us, but the girl had no difficulty spotting me from afar, and she smiled my way. She had an enigmatic aura about her—but a spark of intuition told me she wasn't a stranger.

"You could cause a scene, appearing like that without warning."

I startled at the sound of this new voice. At the entrance to the garden square was my father, calling out to the strange girl.

The girl spun around to take in my father with a long sway of her hair. "It's been so long, Grantz," she said in a friendly greeting.

Faced with one astonishing surprise after another, I could only look on in silence and watch as the scene developed.

My father, previously focused on the girl, glanced in my direction, before letting out a deep sigh. "I wouldn't have expected you to emerge from the forest," he said. "What business do you have calling on me at home?"

"Surely you must have realized. Won't you introduce me? That's why I've come all the way here."

"…Then please come inside…Mistress Lumi."

She gave my father a brief nod, nonplussed by the reverence in his voice and bearing. Then she glanced in my direction once more, her hand fluttering in a friendly wave.

"Euphie, I should introduce you as well," my father, still outside my window, called out without even having to glance in my direction.

"Our guest, Mistress Lumi, is a spirit covenantor."

I could only stare back at the girl in amazement as my father's words resounded in my mind.

"Hmm. You're getting old, Grantz. Although, I'm pleased to see you're still as handsome as I remember."

"That's very kind of you to say."

When I came to the salon as instructed by my father, I found him busy preparing tea and chatting with Mistress Lumi. The corridors as I had made my way here had been so silent that everyone else must have been sound asleep.

"There you are, Euphie."

"Greetings. You must be Grantz's daughter?"

I still hadn't sat down, yet Mistress Lumi waved her hand in casual greeting. Unsure how to react, I responded simply with a small bow. "…Um, Father?"

"Don't worry. Mistress Lumi has just cast a spell to keep everyone from waking. There's nothing dangerous about it. She's a mischievous one, but she means no harm."

"That's right. Can we be friends, *milady*?" Lumi said with a giggle.

As I stared into her faintly greenish-gold eyes, I felt a sudden tightness and raised my hand to my chest.

"Hmm… Are you scared of me? I *am* a little scary, no?"

"Please don't tease my daughter, Mistress Lumi," my father urged.

"I'm sorry, all right? I'm just a poor clueless girl, you know?"

My father let out a quiet exhale and urged me to take a seat. I did so, and he lowered himself into the seat beside me.

My father and I sat shoulder to shoulder, while Mistress Lumi sat across from us. I shrugged, hoping to dispel my sense of discomfort as she continued to stare at me in curiosity.

"Maybe we should introduce ourselves properly? I'm Lumi, a spirit covenantor. And you are?"

"…Euphyllia Magenta."

"Euphyllia," Mistress Lumi repeated, before flashing me a warm smile. "That's a nice name."

I was stunned. Was I so awed by her presence that I couldn't even accept a compliment about my name…?

“Now then, what brings you here today?” my father asked. “It’s rare for you to leave the forest.”

“…The forest?” I echoed.

“I dwell in the Black Forest,” Mistress Lumi responded. “You and that baffling young lady went there to fight a dragon just recently, no?”

“Th-the Black Forest is your home…? But why would you choose to live in such a place…?”

The Black Forest was overrun with monsters, and being so expansive, it was unexplored in many areas. It may have been a well-known place to find spirit stones and the like, but to think that someone would actually choose to live there…

“Why? Because I don’t want to bump into people if I can help it. It hasn’t really caused me any difficulties. Spirit covenantors don’t need to worry about the kinds of things you’re thinking of. So you wanted to know what I’m doing here?” Mistress Lumi paused there to take a sip from her tea and catch her breath. “To judge you for myself. For Grantz’s daughter of all people to feel the signs… It seems like fate.”

“…Why judge me of all people?” I asked in dismay. A spirit covenantor had come to judge *me*?

What could this individual, equal to royalty in status—no, maybe even greater than royalty in the sense that one couldn’t normally interact with such a being as her—hope to see in me?

“…It’s ironic, isn’t it?” Mistress Lumi remarked.

My father’s steadfast expression faltered slightly. As he pressed his fingers up against the corners of his eyes, he let out a deep sigh. “…Do you mean because it’s Euphyllia here, Mistress Lumi?” he asked.

“But it *is* ironic, no? I was so surprised to hear she’s *your* daughter, Grantz. I hadn’t expected a dragon of all things to pop up, or that someone would soar through the air to challenge it, and certainly not that the person holding on behind her would show the signs.”

“…Did you see the battle?” I asked.

“Only from afar. I mean, I’ve promised to lend you all a hand in the case of an emergency, you know? But thanks to you, I didn’t have to.”

Mistress Lumi, with her laughter and guffaws, continued to throw me off. To be honest, I wasn’t very good at dealing with

people like her.

"…So why did you come to judge me? And what exactly are these signs you mentioned?"

"Well, they point to whether you're going to be someone like me."

I sat up straight at Mistress Lumi's words. I understood at once what she meant by the words *someone like me*.

"…You're talking about entering into a spirit covenant?"

"That's right. You're perfectly qualified."

"I am…?"

"Only one who has satisfied certain conditions is able to enter a spirit covenant. It's not at all easy, and there are only a handful of people capable of it."

I could follow Mistress Lumi's words, but I couldn't help wondering whether I had heard her correctly.

I leaned forward. "What exactly is a spirit covenant? And what makes me suitable?"

"…I'm not telling."

"…Huh?" I froze, unsure what to make of this response.

After a short pause, Mistress Lumi breathed a soft sigh and fixed me in her sights. "I'm here to make sure you *don't* enter into one. I'm giving you a warning. I've seen for myself that you have all the essential qualities, so I came to stop you."

I was dumbfounded. Had she come here to prevent me from becoming a spirit covenantor like her? But why? My mind swirled with confusion and unanswered questions.

"A word of advice from a predecessor—don't enter into a spirit covenant."

"Why not…?"

"Because they're not all you think they are. You may see them as *revered spirits*, our dear friends, no? A covenant isn't to be entered into by someone with such faith."

"…But why would you want to stand in the way of a spirit covenant? You're a covenantor yourself, aren't you?"

"That's precisely why… Haven't you noticed anything unsettling about the way I look? I'm pretty sure once you realize what it is, you'll understand at least one of my reasons."

"…Unsettling?" I echoed, staring back at her.

Perhaps there *was* something strange about her, but I couldn't put my finger on it. She looked like any other girl my age…

"*Hmm. You're getting old, Grantz. Although, I'm pleased to see you're still as handsome as I remember*," she'd said.

…Was *girl* the right word…? Yes, she did look to be my age—but if so, why had she spoken like that to my father?

What could those words possibly mean? A chill ran down my spine, and sweat beaded on my forehead. I did my best to keep my voice from trembling. "…Don't spirit covenantors…age?"

"Oh-ho… Hey, kid— Grantz. How old do you think I am?"

"I couldn't say. You haven't changed since the day I met you."

…So spirit covenantors didn't age.

Why did they hide themselves away, always keeping themselves at a distance from the mundanities of the world? If the answer to that question was that they didn't age with the passing of the years, it would make sense.

"Spirit covenantors are unaging, we say. We exist outside the realm of human reason. One who enters into a covenant with a spirit ceases to be human and becomes a covenantor. That's why your father never entered into one."

"Huh?"

I turned to my father, my eyes widening in shock. He hadn't entered into a covenant? In other words, he had met all the necessary conditions and had had the opportunity to do so…?

"Father…? Is that true…?"

"I met all the criteria, but it wasn't what I wanted. That's all there is to it."

"Why…?"

Spirit covenants were regarded as sacred by the people of the Kingdom of Palettia, who considered spirits objects of worship. There were even those who had dedicated their lives to researching the mysteries of such agreements.

And yet my father had elected not to enter into one. Because those who did were frozen in time?

My father spoke up to explain his reasoning. "A nobleman who doesn't age and acquires more power than royalty would be a hindrance to the ruling authorities. I'm a nobleman, not a royal, so I thought it unnecessary. That's all."

"But you *did* originally seek me out for clues to secure a spirit covenant of your own. There was a time when Orphans thought it better that you become a covenantor and take the throne. But you changed your mind in a hurry when you learned how you would be

frozen in time. Ah, I miss those days."

"You and His Majesty were searching for a way to enter into a spirit covenant…?" I murmured.

"At the time, Orphans had little authority, so we set out on a journey to forge a new spirit covenant… It was a long time ago." My father's frown loosened as he reflected on the past.

I could hardly imagine what it must have been like for him to travel around with His Majesty during his youth.

"Orphans, Grantz, and Sylphine. You made a strange trio, don't you think?" Mistress Lumi remarked.

"J-just the three of you?!" I exclaimed. "What about bodyguards?!"

"Orphans considers Princess Anisphia a bit of a problem child, but he was a troublemaker himself while he was a prince. He loved tinkering in the dirt, believe it or not, and was a royal practically in name only."

"T-tinkering in the dirt…?"

"Orphans was a simple man. There was a time when his wish was to become a vassal of the king and receive a fief of his own so he could study agriculture. The reason he gave Princess Anisphia such free rein was probably because he was unable to fulfill his own dreams."

Hearing about His Majesty's past, I felt a twinge of pain in my chest. Like Lady Anis, he, too, had been forced to give up on his dreams to fulfill the responsibilities of his royal title.

…No, I couldn't go along with it. Having been born into royalty, perhaps it was only natural that Lady Anis should have to take on such duties—but that didn't make it any easier to watch her surrender something so dear to her heart.

"Oh, I don't like that look in your eyes," Mistress Lumi exclaimed as she heaved a deep sigh.

"…I'm sorry, but I can't—"

"It isn't exactly easy to enter into a spirit covenant," she interrupted. "Not only do you need all the necessary attributes and qualities, you also need *a wish that compels you to reach out*. Tell me, what makes you want to reach out for a covenant?"

An avalanche of thoughts threatened to bury me.

Was there a wish so dear to me that I would give up on aging, an aspect of my humanity?

A face arose in my mind in response—Lady Anis's.

I wanted to see her laugh, to break out in a smile. I couldn't bear to see her give up her dreams. I wanted her to live freely, just the way she was.

If the responsibilities of queenhood would rob her of her smile, of her dreams, of her future and everything else, what could I do to save her?

So I whispered to myself—was this the right choice? And even if it wasn't, could I give up on her now?

If I had no choice but to watch that smile of hers fade, then I had decided on my wish.

"I want to become queen, to be capable of standing as ruler of this kingdom, and I'll never be able to do that without entering into a spirit covenant."

The overcast sky of my doubts had cleared. There was no hesitation in my determined reply. Even if it meant giving up old age and being left behind in the flow of time, I could accept that so long as Lady Anis still had a smiling future ahead of her.

Mistress Lumi fell silent. After a long pause, deep despair seemed to wash over her face. I didn't know how to react.

"…Your desire to be queen is that strong. I see…"

"Mistress Lumi…?"

"…It's just too cruel," she said in a low voice sapped of energy, her eyes downcast. Finally, she lifted her gaze to catch mine once again. "All the more reason why I have to stop you… But try as I might, nothing will hold you back. That's why you must heed what I'm about to say."

"…Another warning? What are you trying to tell me?"

"The truth, that not even Grantz knows. I must pass it on to you, so you won't repeat the mistakes of the past."

Not even my father knew the truth…? Before I realized it, I was bracing myself as I stared across at her.

Mistress Lumi, looking more ephemeral now, continued gently. "Let me tell you about a truth buried in the darkness of history… This is one story of many…"

So she began, recounting her tale—and so I came to know a story so cruel that I started to question whether salvation even existed.

* * *

I stopped in the corridor running through the mansion and stared up at the moon outside the window. After our discussion had concluded, my father escorted Mistress Lumi to one of the guest rooms, while I made my way back to my own quarters.

The reason I was now standing by the window was no doubt because of my shock after hearing Mistress Lumi's story. The truth she had revealed was as cruel as she'd said.

Indeed, it had rendered me completely speechless. It even explained the sense of ephemeral fragility that she had about her. I understood now why she had never before divulged the reality of her situation and why she was so intent on stopping me from entering into a spirit covenant.

"Euphie."

As I stared at the night sky, my father, whom I had thought would be showing our guest to her room, approached me. He stood by my side as he looked at the moon.

We gazed at the sky by each other's side without saying anything, until finally, my father broke the silence. "What did you think of Mistress Lumi's story?"

"…What did *you* think, Father?" I asked in turn.

He glanced down at me for a second, before turning his gaze back to the moon. "It's a cruel tale—but that's all it is."

"…That's all it is…?" I repeated.

"It doesn't change what I have to do. For me, a spirit covenant isn't an option. So from my perspective, Mistress Lumi's story is just an ancient tale."

"…How can you be so strong, Father?"

"…Let me ask you again—what did you think of it?"

I didn't want to have to answer that question. My father filled the silence with more words of his own. "Mistress Lumi also said she can't stop you from entering into a spirit covenant of your own, so are you willing to stop?"

"…It was such an awful story…," I answered, trying to evade that last question. "It made me wonder if people really can be saved. But I would still make the same choice, no matter how many times the options are presented to me… I can't not do it."

Ironically, it had been Mistress Lumi's cruel tale that had

affirmed my resolve. This would be a momentous decision, one that would affect my past and future—but I had to make it.

"…People have noted a common characteristic in us Magentas for generations now," my father began, changing the subject without warning.

"…Father?"

I glanced up at him. Why on earth would he talk about something else at this point?

"People say that those born to the House of Magenta are steadfastly loyal but sometimes go too far as a result."

"…Do we?"

"Once we've made up our minds, we Magentas can be terribly stubborn. It's so bad that we've even been called doggedly obstinate at times. That's why we tend to give our loyalty only to one person. For me, that person was Orphans—not his brother, the crown prince of the day."

"…Why?"

"Because Orphans was my friend." My father's voice was clear and more imbued with emotion than usual. "I had a lot of talent when I was young and attracted more attention than I should have because of it. People praised me as a prodigy, claiming I had overflowing talent. People gravitated toward me like honey. I couldn't stand them watching my every move. In the end, I could only relax by remaking myself as the future Duke Magenta."

My father shrugged as he recounted the past, his face so refreshing that I couldn't help but stare at him. Right now, his lips were curled in a genuine smile.

"Orphans wasn't fooled by all the vicious rumors. Well, he *did* turn a blind eye to the succession, though…"

"…His Majesty and Lady Anis really do sound like father and daughter," I remarked.

"Indeed. That's precisely why he lets Sylphine walk all over him," my father responded with a chuckle.

His reaction just now left me startled. After all, he had just revealed his inner, most personal face—and surprisingly, what I saw had a bit of a mean streak running through it.

"But I think Sylphine was saved, too, precisely because Orphans is who he is. Orphans was the king we needed to survive that era. That was why we wanted so badly to protect what we were left with."

"…Father."

"I thought I *had* to protect it. Even if it meant robbing our own children of their freedom. In retrospect, I may have been too obdurate. Once Orphans became king, we resolved not to have our children repeat the same mistakes and suffer the same hardships we did…but the times have changed. We can't keep on relying on the same old solutions," my father murmured as he stared into the distance.

I had no words to console him. He probably wasn't wrong, but he wasn't right, either. Something told me that everyone—including us, the younger generation—had to make their own mistakes and grow little by little.

"For me, Orphans was a friend, a pillar of support."

"What do you mean?"

"He kept me from losing sight of myself. As a person, and as a friend, I wanted to follow him on that path into a bright future, so I dedicated myself to him. He gave up on his own dreams to defend the realm, so I made him the focal point of my endeavors. No doubt Sylphine felt the same way."

"…Loyalty and friendship?"

"But you seem to be a little different from me back then."

"…Huh? Are you teasing me?"

A little suspicion had wriggled its way into my mind—at heart, was my father not quite the magnanimous figure that he made himself out to be?

"If you think I'm teasing you, you must have some inkling of what I mean, no?"

I said nothing.

"I hope you're not trying to suggest that silence is golden, Euphie?"

"…I just never thought I'd find myself irritated with you, Father. And yet here I am."

"I just wanted to say that you and I *are* different. Choose the answer that you think is right."

Was he trying to say that he had followed King Orphans out of friendship and loyalty, and that my feelings for Lady Anis were of a different nature?

…But he was right. They *were* different.

"I don't want Lady Anis to have to give up on her dreams. That's *my* hope."

“Even if Princess Anisphia would never ask you to do this?”

“…She’s my pillar of support, and I…I cherish her. Her dreams, too. I won’t let her give up on them.” My resolution was firm now.

I stared up at my father in challenge, but he met my gaze coolly. “If that’s something you can’t give up on, then do what you must.”

After he left, I stared once more at the night sky.

The moonlight pouring down from above was soon hidden behind a blanket of clouds. Shrouded now in darkness, I murmured under my breath.

“Even if salvation was never guaranteed in this world…”

I would waver no longer. With that promise, I reached out to the sky above, hand outstretched, and slowly clenched my fist.

Chapter 6
An Unsought Intervention

Waking up in the morning was the absolute worst. Overcome with gloom, I stared at the ceiling of my bedroom in the detached palace and let out a heavy sigh.

"…I feel so…blegh…"

This was stress; there could be no doubt about it. Ah, I couldn't take it anymore. There were just so many things I had to be mindful of if I was to reassume my royal position. The nobles I had met continued to look at me askance, while at the same time, I had to work to see past their fancy words to the unspoken truth.

"…Ah, right. I'm free today for once."

My father must have realized I had reached my limit, as I had nothing planned for my schedule today. No doubt this was a silent message from him, urging me to take some time to get some rest.

I would let myself be pampered when I wanted to be pampered! I had always been this way, but my father would be furious if I said that to him. All the same, I would probably collapse if I kept on going like I was. Everything was just so suffocating, and all that did was remind me that I wasn't cut out to be royalty.

As I stared at the ceiling, my lips pursing in a frown, a knock came at the door. Ilia stepped inside, raising an eyebrow when she saw me slumped over on the bed, before breathing a resigned sigh. "…Good morning, Your Highness. Would you like breakfast?"

"I'll eat…but make it something light, please. I don't think I'll be able to hold anything heavy down for long…"

"I thought you might say that. We've already prepared a light repast. It isn't quite enough to warrant using the dining room, so please, let's go to the parlor. I'll have Lainie prepare some tea."

"Thank you, Ilia. You're a lifesaver."

"…That's what I'm here for."

Ilia's unchanging attitude went a little way to soothe my mood. I let her help me get dressed, and we made our way to the parlor.

There, Lainie was standing with a finger pressed to her lips, seemingly moaning in consternation. She looked to be focused on reviewing the procedure for brewing tea that Ilia had taught her.

"Good morning, Lainie," I called out.

“Ah! Good morning, Lady Anis.”

“You’re hard at work, I see. Ilia’s a strict teacher, isn’t she?”

“Not at all. She’s been very good to me.”

“Lainie is a quick learner, and I’m pleased to guide her,” Ilia said, a touch of pride in her voice.

I smiled at the thought of her doting on her quick-witted pupil, when she glared across at me. “Is there something you would like to say?”

“N-not really,” I demurred, turning away.

At that moment, there came a knock at the door. Lainie was quick to respond, rushing to see who it was. “Ah, Lady Euphyllia. Welcome home!”

“I’m back… Were you all kicking up a row again?”

Euphie, back from her stay at the Magenta estate, stood in the doorway. Given her question, she must have been able to hear us talking from outside. Lainie grimaced and forced a smile as she nodded.

Yep, I thought. It sure was a relief to have her back.

“Welcome back, Euphie.”

“Yes, Lady Anis… I know this is sudden, but can we have a word? Are you busy?”

“Huh? You want to talk? What about?”

“The future. I’ve asked my father to grant me an audience with His Majesty, too.”

I felt the muscles in my face tensing. Something told me that if Euphie was this serious, even going so far as to ask Duke Grantz to let her speak directly with my father, then whatever this was, it wouldn’t have a simple solution.

Something seemed different about her, or was I just imagining it? Either way, I felt a dull stirring in my chest.

“I’ve realized what I need to do. And I want both you and His Majesty to hear me out, Lady Anis.”

Overwhelmed by the force of her determination, all I could do was nod.

* * *

Euphie said she wanted Ilia and Lainie to accompany us, so we made our way to the royal castle as a group. My father and the

others must have already made time to see us, as we were ushered straight into his office.

Waiting inside was my father, my mother, Duke Grantz, and…a girl whose face I had never seen before.

She had platinum hair, greenish-gold eyes, and a witchlike appearance that seemed to set her off as different from a normal girl her age. I found myself catching my breath as I took in her aura.

"You're here, Anis."

"Father… Who is this?"

"Don't be rude, Anis. Our guest, well…"

"Greetings, Princess. I'm Lumi. But maybe the title *spirit covenantor* will mean more to you?"

"…Huh?!" I cried out in disbelief as the girl introduced herself.

She was a spirit covenantor? But she didn't look any older than I was…?

"What is a spirit covenantor doing here…?"

It was Euphie who spoke up next. "Because of me. I asked her to join us."

She was acting like this was all so natural. When on earth had all this happened?

Only Lainie and Ilia were as perplexed as I was. My father, mother, and Duke Grantz all seemed unfazed.

Euphie put our confusion aside as she spoke up once more: "Your Majesty, Your Highness. Thank you for granting me an audience today."

"Grantz said there was an important matter to be discussed, but did that request come from you, Euphyllia?" my father asked. "I wasn't expecting Mistress Lumi to be joining us, either…"

"I needed to speak with you at your earliest convenience, Your Majesty, so I urged my father to say whatever he had to."

"No, it's all right, Euphyllia. I don't mind… But what is this about…?" My father rubbed his belly, as though suffering from a stomachache. To be honest, I wasn't feeling the greatest, either.

"May we take a seat first?" Euphie asked. "I think this might not be an easy conversation."

"Hmm… Ilia, Lainie, you sit down, too," my father urged. "There's no need to stand on ceremony here."

"Are you sure?"

"By all means. I assume Euphyllia brought you both here for a

reason?”

“I did,” Euphie answered. “If you don’t mind.”

Ilia and Lainie had both been standing toward the rear of the room, but with my father and Euphie urging them to join us, they reluctantly sat down. The sofas were large, but with so many people, they were starting to feel a little cramped.

Ilia and Lainie sat beside me, while Euphie was joined by Duke Grantz and Lumi. My father and mother occupied the remaining sofa.

Once everyone was fully seated, Euphie cleared her throat before she began. “First of all, I would like to thank you again for agreeing to see me. I have a proposal for you, Your Majesty.”

“…Hmm. And this has something to do with Mistress Lumi?”

“Yes. Very much so.”

My father’s expression tensed up as he watched her.

Euphie, however, nodded before continuing: “Your Majesty, Your Highness. I’ll start with a report. I have been recognized by Mistress Lumi as meeting certain criteria.”

“…What?! Is that true?!” my father cried out, jumping up with such momentum that he almost flew out of his seat.

My mother, too, had raised a hand to her mouth, staring at Euphie in open-eyed astonishment.

Unable to grasp what in the world she meant by that, I peered into Euphie’s eyes. “…What criteria?”

Lumi answered, “To enter into a spirit covenant. She has the capacity to do so.”

“…Whaaaaaaaaaat?!” I cried out loud. I never expected for a second that this was where this conversation was going. “A-a spirit covenant…? Euphie?”

Euphie could perform the same feat as the first ruler of the Kingdom of Palettia. I was so taken aback that I didn’t even know where to look.

But while my reaction was pure surprise, my parents looked troubled.

“…It can’t be. Do you intend to become a covenantor yourself, Euphyllia?” my father asked.

“Yes, I do.”

“Even knowing the truth of what that entails?”

“Yes.”

My father’s expression turned grave at this response… Could it

be that he didn't want her to enter into a covenant? But why not?

"Euphyllia… Becoming a spirit covenantor…will make it hard for you to keep living in the earthly world."

"Huh? What does *that* mean, Mother?" I asked.

"…Anis, how old does Mistress Lumi look to you?"

"How old…? About the same age as me. So what?"

"She's looked that way ever since we first met her…decades ago."

My curiosity piqued, I turned to Lumi in surprise. She had been a young girl for decades, at minimum…?

"Are spirit covenantors…immortal?" I asked.

"Indeed," Lumi answered. "Although, I'm not yet a thousand years old."

Not yet a thousand? In other words, she had been alive at the very least for several centuries.

Did entering into a spirit covenant grant eternal youth? Given that Lumi had clearly exceeded a regular human life span, the term *immortal* certainly did seem appropriate.

Lainie, having realized this possibility, stared fixedly at Lumi. If spirit covenantors truly were immortal, they held the secret that the first vampire had so desperately sought to uncover.

"…Are you all right with that, Euphie?" I asked.

Why would Euphie be willing to go so far to enter into a covenant if that would be the consequence? I couldn't fathom the workings of her mind.

"Yes. I'll need to enter into a spirit covenant to fulfill my wish."

"Your wish?"

"Yes. Your Majesty, Your Highness. If I can become a spirit covenantor, I would like for you to grant me something."

"And what would that be?" my father asked.

"I would like you to adopt me into the royal family."

"…What?"

Who voiced that question? It could have been me, but it could equally have been my father or mother. It could well have even been all three of us. Because with the exception of Duke Grantz and Lumi, everyone present was taken aback.

"…W-wait. Hold on! What are you talking about, Euphie?! *Adopt* you?! You've got to be kidding! Why would you even suggest something like that?!"

"So that His Majesty can grant me permission to succeed him

on the throne."

This time, my father bent backward. My mother, sitting beside him, was equally thunderstruck. I, too, froze in place, unable to comprehend Euphie's declaration.

"Y-you want to inherit the throne?" my father mouthed. "Y-you? W-wait…wait… Grantz! What is the meaning of this?! Why in blazes is Euphyllia suggesting such a thing?!"

"Not because I approve of it, I assure you. But Euphyllia has made up her mind by herself, defying my own wishes to do so. However, it's also not an entirely outlandish proposition. At the very least, I thought she should be permitted to present it as an option."

"You've defied your own father, Euphie?!" I cried.

That was so out of character for her that I could hardly imagine it.

For her to come out and say she wanted to inherit the throne for herself… It was so baffling! No wonder Duke Grantz had objected!

"How on earth could we allow you to do such a thing?! What a ridiculous suggestion…!" My mother fought to bring her voice under control but ended up falling silent in the face of Euphie's resolute determination. I was stunned to see that Euphie had managed to silence even my mother.

"I have only one wish—that Lady Anis not become queen," Euphie said.

"Wh-what…?" I whispered.

"You must be surprised. And I know I'm speaking out of turn. But I'm also saying this for the sake of the realm. Your Majesty, Your Highness, I think you both understand that major obstacles stand in the way of Lady Anis acceding to the throne. And there is a good chance that worse could follow."

"…What are you trying to say, Euphyllia?"

"Lady Anis won't be accepted by the nobility for one simple reason—she has no talent for magic. No amount of magicology achievements or innovative magical tools will be able to resolve that."

"…So you want me to give *you* the throne?"

"I've been raised to be queen for years. I was originally engaged to Prince Algard to bring my skills to the royal family, no? I believe I have the necessary qualities to bring the aristocracy around."

“Y-you may well be the daughter of a duke, but your blood connection to the royal family is too distant!” my father objected.

“That’s right! We couldn’t possibly adopt someone from the House of Magenta!” my mother added.

My parents were rejecting her proposal. Meanwhile, Duke Grantz spoke up to dismiss their complaints. “If the issue is her connection to my family, the House of Magenta could cut all ties. You wouldn’t have to worry about that, Orphans, Sylphine.”

“Grantz?!” my father objected. “What…what are you saying?! You’ll cut ties with your own daughter?!”

“The close relationship between the House of Magenta and the royal family could pose a problem, yes?” Duke Grantz continued. “That being the case, I have no intention of backing Euphyllia should you adopt her. I will continue to support passing the throne to Princess Anisphia.”

“That’s crazy!” my mother cried. “That would mean casting Euphie out into the cold, alone!”

“That’s why it has to be a spirit covenant,” Euphie said. “If I can perform a similar feat as the kingdom’s founder, I should be able to garner the support of those nobles who hold firmly to their spiritual beliefs. As distant relatives of the royal family, we in the House of Magenta have been your foremost servants. We mustn’t spare ourselves in the face of this crisis threatening the royal family’s very existence. I’ll give myself to become a new founder, to usher in the birth of a new queen.”

“Th-that’s…”

“Isn’t this the more peaceful way, rather than forcing Lady Anis to become queen?”

I just couldn’t fathom why Euphie was saying all this. No, I understood at some level, but I didn’t want to. My brain was freezing over. I wanted nothing more than to cover my ears.

Why wasn’t anyone speaking out against this? A spirit covenant wasn’t something that could be pulled off so easily. Nor was it a certainty that she would even be accepted as ruler.

“Why, Euphie…? Don’t you know how crazy you sound?”

Please, I said to myself, *tell me this is all just some bad joke.*

Yet her response was like something out of a nightmare. “If I can successfully enter into a spirit covenant, you won’t need to accept a throne you don’t want, Lady Anis.”

“…Hold on, wait! Euphie! I never asked you to do this!”

“Yes, I know. I swore to protect you by myself. I don’t want you to have to be queen.”

“…Are you serious?! Can’t you see how rude that is?! How disrespectful?!”

“If this can help avoid conflict, and keep you smiling, I don’t mind. Lady Anis, do you really think you’re capable of leading the realm as queen?”

“What…?”

“You might be able to sit on the throne. You could probably even bring change to the realm. But your talents won’t be accepted as it is now. Blood will be spilled to institute that change. And then you’ll hate yourself for having made the people suffer.”

“…That’s right, I don’t have any talent for magic. I know I’ll never be accepted by the kingdom’s nobility. And even if I could change the country, the best I could manage is to do so by force and then pass it along to the next generation! I know all that better than anyone! But *that’s* why you’re willing to go this far?! To take the fate of the kingdom on your own shoulders?! To compete with me for the throne?! How is that any different from what happened between Algard and me?!”

All I had was my blood legitimacy. Allie had had that *and* magical talent, and he was a boy as well. He was a natural choice for future king.

But between Euphie and me, we each had only one point in our favor—she may have had magical talent, but I was the legitimate heir by birthright.

Which would prove more acceptable? No doubt the answer would be different for everyone. In the end, this might just lead to more conflict. For that reason, I couldn’t accept what Euphie was trying to do. There was no argument in her favor.

And that was why I was left completely devastated by her next words. “But if I become queen, I can keep your dreams alive!”

She wasn’t doing this for the realm, let alone the people. She wanted this for my sake.

“I’ve been brought up to serve as part of the royal family. I have a proven track record as a noblewoman. And you’ve helped clear the disgrace of my failed engagement.”

I winced. “…! But—!”

“I’m better suited to live in the world of politics as queen. I’m sure you could manage, but you have other dreams that you want

to fulfill more. Am I wrong? You love magic, you want to understand it, you want to share it with as many people as possible! No?! So how could you become queen *and* keep on developing magicology?!"

I could say nothing in response. Yes, that wish remained alive in my heart, but I couldn't go along with this. It was just so selfish. There was no way I could allow it.

Up until just recently, Allie had been here, and so I had thought the task of ruling was none of my business. Now he was gone, and I was the only legitimate heir remaining, which meant that the duty was mine to carry out.

That was what I honestly thought, which was why Euphie's next words hurt so much.

"I would be better at carrying out this role than you, Lady Anis. Whether it's as queen consort or queen regnant, the responsibilities are just as heavy. No, I'll become queen because it's what *I* want. I won't deny everything that I am. I want you to fulfill your dreams."

"My…dreams…"

"I want you to continue your pursuit of the mysteries of magic. To seek them out. I'll give you everything you need to do so. Because if I become queen, you'll be my people, my family. I want you to make your dreams comes true, because your dreams will enrich the whole kingdom."

In the midst of this heated discussion, we both rose to our feet, our eyes locked in a tense clash. Without once looking away, Euphie stepped toward me and held out her hand. "Even if my dream isn't fulfilled, I vow to stand by your side and assist in your reign, Lady Anis. And if it should come true, allow me to defend your dreams, to see them come true. I only want for you to be free. Let's work hand in hand, together—without conflict. Please, take my hand. It's my turn to help you now."

"What…? Your turn…?"

"To save you from accepting a life of despair."

I stared at Euphie's outstretched hand. She had proffered it to help me—and my own hand reached out to meet it.

Just before they touched—I flicked her hand away with all the force I could muster.

"…Huh?"

I was probably more surprised by what I had done than anyone else. Part of me was willing to take her hand. If we could shoulder

this burden together, no doubt it would become so much easier to carry.

If she said it was all right, wasn't that enough? That view certainly wasn't wrong. But even so… I was afraid of her hand.

I could hardly breathe. My vision was blurred. *No, not here*, I told myself. *Don't cry.*

"No, no… Don't force me to cling to you…!"

"Lady Anis…?"

"Even if everything you've said works out smoothly, even if you do become eligible to inherit the throne, your claim will never be stronger than mine! I'm a royal princess, no matter how little people want to accept me! If you take that role from me, Euphie… what will I have left?!"

Euphie watched on, stunned. Duke Grantz, too, was wide-eyed in astonishment. Lainie was covering her mouth, while Ilia seemed to find the whole thing incredible.

"…Anis…?" My mother's voice quivered as she called out my name.

Euphie, my father, and my mother were staring right at me, their eyes open to their limits.

I slammed my mouth shut when I realized what I had just said.

I had never said I wasn't worthy of being a royal princess, so why was Euphie of all people using such an argument now? Why couldn't I be accepted as me?!

I didn't understand. I didn't *want* to understand. Everything was all jumbled up, my thoughts and emotions all over the place.

I felt like screaming out loud—*Why? Why? Why?*—but my nausea held me back. I just wanted to spit it all out.

But if I did let it all loose, there would be no turning back. I couldn't stand to let everyone see me like that. I had to disappear—and so I bolted for the door.

"Wait, Anis! Wait! Anisphia!"

Someone called out behind me in a pained voice. Wanting nothing more than to cover my ears, to go somewhere where that voice couldn't reach me, I stormed through the corridors of the castle paying no heed to what anyone might think.

And so I ran—without even understanding precisely what was so painful or terrifying.

CHAPTER 7

I had fled the halls of the royal castle and now found myself wandering with no destination in sight. I just wanted to be alone, for no one to find me, to not have to listen to anyone.

Before I knew it, I seemed to have somehow ended up in the castle town. I wasn't dressed properly for a surreptitious outing, so I hid in a back alley struggling to conceal any sound of my presence.

"…Why did things have to turn out this way?"

I cradled my knees in my arms, sitting with my back pressed up against the wall. As my strength left me, tears began to spill down my cheeks. After all that, I couldn't keep my emotions in check anymore.

I wanted to wail like a child—but if I did, someone might find me here, so I stifled my voice, buried my face in my lap, and cried.

I don't know how long I sat scrunched up there, but when a voice sounded above me, I hurriedly raised my face in alarm. "… Hey, hey. You've gotta be kidding me."

Somehow, it was Tomas.

"…Tomas? Why are you…?"

"Can't you see how conspicuous you look? You stand out even when you're trying not to. I had my suspicions, but here you are… Now look what a mess I've gotten myself into! I should have just let you be!" Tomas let out an exasperated sigh, raising a hand to his forehead.

I could only stare up at him blankly—when he placed his coat over my head.

"Can you stand?"

"…Huh?"

"I've found you now, so I can hardly pretend I didn't. I'll take you back to my workshop, so cover your face."

"…All right."

As urged, I rose to my feet and held Tomas's jacket over my head to hide my face as he led me by the hand.

We took a detour through the back alleys to avoid being seen, until finally we arrived at his workshop. Normally, when I went to see him, I entered through the front door, but today we sneaked in

through the back.

"Anyway, why don't you sit down?"

"…Yeah. I'm sorry. Thank you."

"…You look pretty worse for wear," Tomas murmured as he rubbed the back of his head in exasperation.

Once I was firmly seated, I stared vacantly around his house.

I had only stepped foot into the back rooms a handful of times before. Ever since his parents had passed away, Tomas lived alone, and the building seemed too large for only one occupant.

As I glanced around, Tomas brought me a cup of tea. "Here, drink this… Ah, are you afraid I'll poison you or something?"

"Thank you… You would never poison me, Tomas."

"Right."

I had practically given him a compliment, yet Tomas had responded with a click of his tongue. He could be so unreasonable at times, I thought as I took a sip from the warm drink. Perhaps that helped to relieve my tension, as my body began to relax.

"…Go home once you've calmed down. Do you want me to let the palace know you're here?"

"…No, please… I don't want to go back just yet… Don't tell anyone I'm here, either…"

"…You can be a real pain sometimes, huh…?"

"Aren't you supposed to bite your tongue and try to offer comfort at times like this?"

"Is that what you expect from me? Why don't you go home before you end up making a scene? You're in my way."

"Oh…" Those words brought tears to my eyes.

Just before I could burst into fresh sobs, Tomas glanced around in panic, rubbing the back of his head. "I'm sorry! I'll hide you, all right? You can stay as long as you want! Just make sure you head home before sunset! Or if anyone comes to fetch you!"

"…I wonder if anyone *will* come…"

"You know… Ah, fine. I'm not much of a listener, but just let it all out."

"…Really?"

"Like I said, I'm not much of a listener."

So he claimed, but he was clearly willing to listen. I was so relieved that I wanted to start crying all over again. And so I let my words spill out one after the next.

I told him how it might be possible for Euphie to enter into a

spirit covenant. How if she could, she wanted to take the throne in my stead. How she had insisted it would all be for my sake. And how angry I was that she was willing to do something so absurd.

Tomas listened on in silence. As I spoke, the pain in my chest grew more and more intense, and I hugged my body as I shrank inward.

"…I thought you didn't care about the throne?"

"I didn't! But that was because I had Allie to fall back on! I always thought he would make the better king, but he's gone now, and the responsibility falls on me…"

If I didn't do this, what good was I as a royal princess? If those around me decided that I was a poor option as a queen due to my inability to use magic, that I didn't need to worry about becoming queen…then why had I even been born a princess?

"It's awful, and after everything that's happened, she has the gall to say I should just give up!" I shouted. "That I'm not cut out for it. Because I should follow other dreams. So she won't allow it, she says! As if I need her permission…!"

"…What are you going on about? If you don't become queen, you can keep on living like you have. And if Lady Euphie gets into trouble as queen, you can always give her a helping hand, no?" Tomas said, crossing his arms with a sullen look.

But I found myself shaking my head. "…I don't know. That's why it's come to this. If it was that easy, this wouldn't even be a problem! I don't want the responsibilities of the throne, but I don't want people to refuse to recognize my legitimacy either! I just want to learn more about magic, to pursue magic that I can use. But I don't want to sacrifice anyone else to save myself. I'm a royal princess, and if I can't even do this much…then what good am I as a princess?"

"Why does that bother you so much?" Tomas asked sharply.

Why *did* I care about being a royal princess? But the more I tried to put my jumbled thoughts and emotions into some sense of order, the more confused I found myself.

"Princess or not, you'll still be you."

"Well… I guess…"

"I don't really get why you're so earnest about it all, but you don't need to worry so much, you know? There are people who care about you."

As Tomas spoke, several faces came to mind—Euphie's first,

followed by Ilia, Lainie, my father, and…my mother.

"…Ah, it's no good."

"Huh? What's no good?"

"I…have to carry out my responsibilities…as a royal princess…"

"Look, I don't know much about royalty, but you've been doing pretty damn well this far, don't you think?"

I looked up and met Tomas's gaze. He was staring right at me.

"You're not just any old princess, that's for sure. But there are plenty of people who would love to have you as their queen. That's how good of a job you've been doing."

"But…the nobility won't accept me…"

"What's the problem, then? You don't need to force the matter… I'm worried about you, too. I'm worried that if you take the throne, you'll be crushed by it. You're too kind at heart."

…Was I really? I didn't know. I had simply been living my life according to my own whims. I hadn't paid much attention to what people thought of me. I hadn't cared what they thought.

But I couldn't keep up that attitude if I was going to inherit the throne. I didn't want to live in a world that refused to accept me—but I didn't want to lose my freedom, either.

Even so, I couldn't give up on being a princess. And part of me whispered that I should cast my selfishness aside. These two extremes of my emotions kept bandying me back and forth. I found myself unable to say anything—I couldn't even muster enough energy to touch the cup of tea Tomas had brewed for me.

That was when a violent knock came at the front door to the workshop.

"Tomas! Are you there? It's Euphie! If you're inside, answer me!"

"Wh-what?! L-Lady Euphie…?"

Euphie's voice had come out of nowhere, and it was filled with urgency. I cowered in my seat.

Tomas let out a sigh at my reaction. "…A promise is a promise. All right?"

If someone came to fetch me, I would have to go home. I knew that. I might not want to go, but I couldn't cause Tomas any further trouble by insisting on staying behind.

Once I nodded in acceptance, Tomas stood up and stepped into his workshop. I could only wrap my arms tightly around my knees

as I watched him go.

A few moments later, Euphie stepped inside, her breathing ragged. She must have been looking all over for me. "…Lady Anis."

My feelings, though undefined, forced me to avert my gaze. Even when she called out to me, I couldn't answer—so I couldn't even see her reaction.

"…I'll give you both some space. Talk things over properly. Give me a shout when you're ready to go."

"I'm sorry for all the trouble, Tomas," Euphie said.

"If you're really sorry, don't let this happen again… Make sure you understand each other fully from now on." With that said, Tomas made his way into the workshop, leaving Euphie and me behind.

"…I'm glad you're all right, Lady Anis."

"…Leave me alone."

"I can't do that," Euphie said, reaching out to place a hand on my shoulder—but not before I could flick it away.

She stared down at me as she clutched her rejected hand. Only now did I look up at her. She was frowning.

And yet for some reason, that grimness in her expression softened, as though a wave of relief had welled up from the bottom of her heart. I stared at her, unsure why she was suddenly relieved.

"…What's with that look?"

"I feel like I've finally gotten to your true feelings. Heh-heh… You've never gotten angry at me before, Lady Anis."

"Huh…?"

"I can be your enemy, you know? I'm not here just for you to protect me. We can have different opinions and different wishes. But we should still be able to tell each other what we're really thinking."

She was saying she didn't want me just to look out for her, that we could have contrary views and outlooks and ideas. And even so, we could still strive to understand one another.

"To be honest, I wasn't expecting you to be pleased, but your reaction was still worse than I had imagined."

"…I'm sorry I overreacted."

"No, I was in the wrong. Being a princess is more important to you than I realized," Euphie said, taking my hand.

I didn't flick it away this time. As her fingers overlapped my own, they conveyed her gentle warmth.

As I brushed up against her body, my eyes suddenly overflowed with tears. Unable to hold them back any longer, I pressed my forehead to her hand. “Euphie… You’re so cruel…! I mean, I… I’ve always wanted to use magic…! To use the kind of magic everyone would accept…! If I could do that, I wouldn’t have to lose anyone or anything…!”

Euphie was precious and warm…and I hated her for it. She had everything I lacked. She was closer than anyone else to the ideal I most wanted to be.

At the same time, my love for her risked turning into hate. She was a good person, a wonderful person—and that was why I found it so hard to forgive her. “*You* should have been born into my position! There’s no limit to your magical talents! You would have been perfect, right from the very beginning! At everything! But why do you have to rob me of what I am now?! Now that Allie’s gone, I’m the only heir left! It’s my duty! It’s *my* responsibility, and I don’t want it taken away!”

My fist met Euphie’s chest. I clung to her, while my swirling emotions crashed against her again and again in a storm of frustration, regret, and hatred.

But Euphie didn’t waver, and she did nothing to hold me back. I had to stop, I thought, but my hands kept moving of their own accord, childishly hitting her.

“I’m a princess…!” I cried, my lips trembling miserably. “No one expected anything from me…but I did my best! I really did! I tried to keep out of the way, so Allie could be king! But now he’s gone! All because of me! What was I supposed to do?!”

Though he was far away now, I could still remember my younger brother very vividly. I had ruined his life. Because of me, our whole family had gone to ruin.

So I had to take responsibility—me, not anyone else.

“If I’m the only one who can do it, I will! But now you’re saying I’m still not needed?! Even now that Allie’s gone?! Even if I don’t like it, even if I don’t want to, I have to do it!”

I held Euphie by the shoulders, letting my raging emotions loose. Alongside my tears, the broken dam of my innermost feelings continued fuming.

“I loved magic! So much! All I wanted was to be able to use it! But I’m still a princess! I’m still my parents’ daughter…! My mom cried, you know?! To have a useless daughter like me…! It’s all my

fault! That's why I've done everything I can! Why I'll keep on trying…! So don't…don't make me irrelevant…! I can do it…! I'll be fine…!"

Memories flooded through my mind. I might not have been able to use magic as a young girl, but still, tears in her eyes, my mother had read to me, had helped set me on the first steps of my investigations.

"*I'm sorry*," I remembered her whispering. My beautiful, kind, loving mother. Because of me, she had been reduced to tears, had apologized for failing to pass on to me the gift of magic.

It wasn't her fault. And it wasn't just for Allie's sake that I had given up my claim to the throne. I had done it to save her, too. I was such a wild, out-of-control daughter, but I didn't need her to worry about me. I would be fine. If only everyone else could have thought that way.

Maybe it was inevitable that people would hate me. I just had to get used to people despising me, to no one having any expectations for me. That way, I could live freely without forcing unhappiness on anyone.

"It's fine," I whispered to myself over and over. "I'll be fine. I am fine."

"There's nothing fine about this!" Euphie cried out in denial, grabbing me by the shoulders and pushing me away.

Her face was consumed with anger, her emotions so tumultuous that tears glistened in her eyes. "You can't just leave things as they are and sacrifice yourself! How can you allow yourself to do that?! All the while people refuse to accept you, hate you even?! That isn't *fine*! The throne will just make you suffer! You'll never be accepted by this country!"

"…Stop it."

"But that doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you! It's the institution of the crown that's at fault if it won't accept a ruler who can't use magic! It's the nobility who's the problem for only caring about magical achievements! And there's something wrong with the whole realm if it doesn't care about making people happy!"

"Stop it! I don't want to hear that anymore! My father and my mother have done everything they can to preserve this country! And I'll just end up destroying it! No matter how much I want to, I can't use magic! I'm devoid of talent! You can use magic whenever

you want! How could *you* ever understand?!"

"You've been protecting me, haven't you? With the power of magic, which you believe in more strongly than anyone else."

Faced with Euphie's last comment, I forgot myself. My lips moved up and down, but I couldn't breathe. I simply stared back at her in disbelief.

The strength of her will shattered the weak part of me that wanted to believe she was lying. I could see that she had spoken now from the heart.

"Magic isn't power that one receives from the spirits. It's something that has to be passed on through the nobility. It's the power, and an oath, to bring happiness to the realm, and smiles to the faces of its people. That's what it ought to be." Euphie reached out and caught me in a strong embrace. Her strength and inner warmth quickly enveloped me. "No one has fought for this kingdom more than you, all by yourself. Even if no one wants to recognize it, you've created your own kind of magic. Who else could have defeated that dragon? Who else could have discovered the truth about Lainie and stopped Prince Algard before he could do more damage? Those feats are yours, all of them," she whispered in my ear, conveying her deepest feelings. Acknowledging my accomplishments.

Thinking back, I had lived a trying life. There had been more setbacks and failures than I could count, but I had always been determined to keep pressing on. After all, this was the path I wanted to traverse.

But I couldn't deny that something had been driving me, that I had been running away from something. After all, without magic, I was worthless as a princess.

I hadn't cared to succeed to the throne, so I had abandoned my right. But it was precisely because it was so important to me that I had given it away.

Even if my father watched on with dismay, even if my mother reproved me again and again, even if Allie hated me for it, I thought it was what would make everyone happy. That was all I'd wished for.

But still, I couldn't give up on magic. I yearned for it, and I

despaired, but I couldn't give up hope. So I continued to turn my back on one thing after the next. But the truth was…

"Should I really be a princess…? To be my parents' daughter…?"

I had always wanted to give voice to that question, and to say to them, *I am your daughter.*

Euphie hugged me close, strong enough to quiet my trembling body—and that strength assured me that I was here, now.

"Let's go home, Lady Anis. If you want an answer to that question, there's someone waiting for you to ask it."

Faced with these words, I clung to Euphie, sobbing like a child. I finally let go of everything that had happened throughout the years as the tears poured out of me nonstop.

Euphie held me in her arms until I lost track of time, until my tears dried up and my emotions settled.

* * *

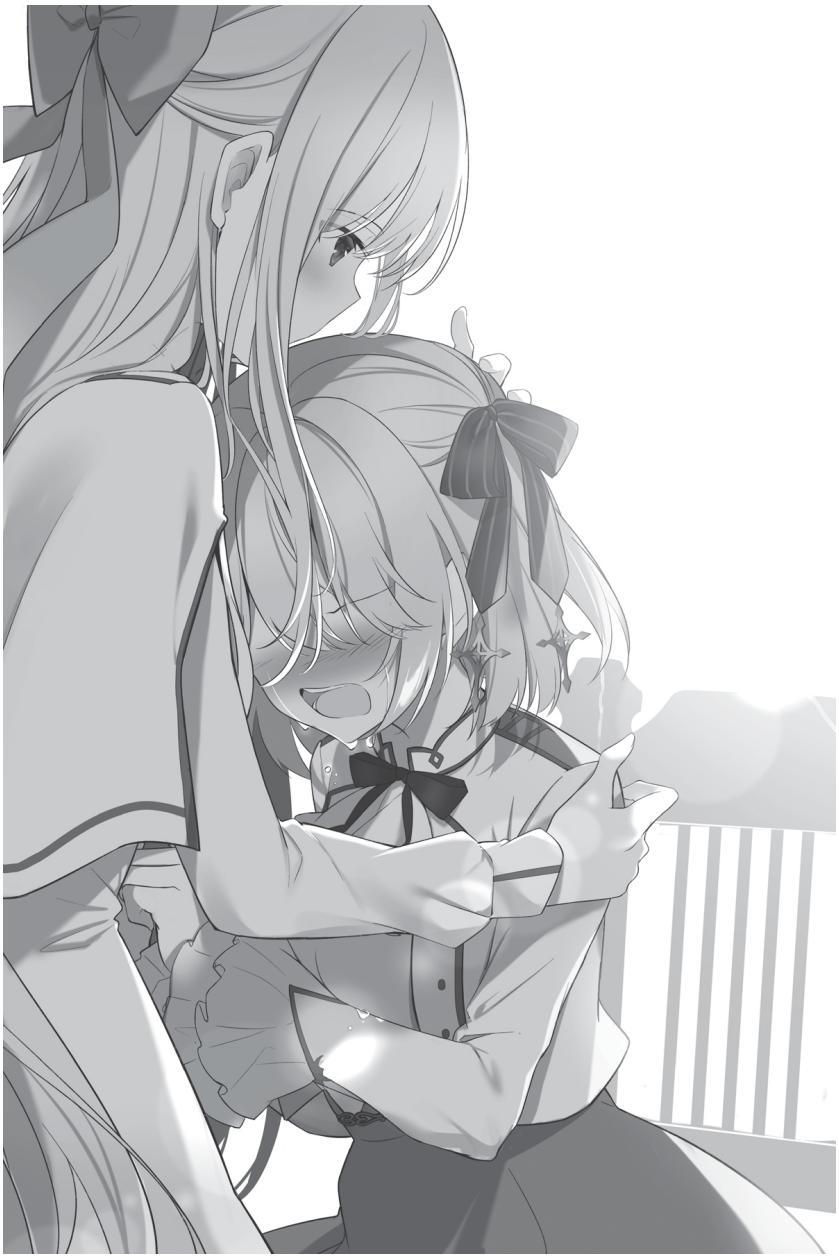
After bawling my eyes out, I finally calmed down enough for us to leave the Gana Armory. Tomas lent me his cloak, insisting he hadn't heard anything.

I hadn't been able to say anything to him after crying so hard, but he gave me a light pat on the back as I left. That was enough for me to understand his feelings.

Euphie held me by the hand as we walked back to the detached palace.

"…I'll have to apologize to everyone," I murmured.

"Indeed. The queen especially. After you stormed out, she looked like she might collapse. If not for Lainie's help, she probably would have, you know? His Majesty and Ilia should be looking after her by now, though."



“Huh…? Is everyone at the detached palace?”

“Ilia insisted on coming with me, but she wasn’t in a sound frame of mind, so I demanded to go alone. And it would have been too much on Lainie to make her wait after the king and queen alone…”

“That was decisive of you…”

“Yes. I would do anything for you.”

My face flushed immediately. I felt like swatting her hand away, but I couldn’t bring myself to part with that warmth. I didn’t want to let go of her now.

When we reached the villa, Ilia darted toward me. I was taken aback to see her running so fast. I quickly hid behind Euphie’s back.

“Lady Euphyllia! Your Highness…!”

“It’s all right. She’s calmed down.”

“…Your Highness…”

Ilia was usually so stoic, but her expression now was worn and ragged. Traces of anxiety still lingered on her face, and though she was clearly overjoyed to see me, she didn’t yet look fully relieved.

I flashed her a weak smile, and she let out a deep breath before saying, “…My apologies. I was rather distraught.”

“No, I lost control first… I’m sorry, Ilia.”

“Not at all. This was my fault. I’ve been by your side for so many years, but still I failed to—to…”

I startled to see her trembling in obvious passion, her voice failing her. I had never asked her to feel responsible for me, so in the end, I didn’t know what to do with this situation, either.

“Ilia, please show us to the king and queen.”

“…Yes, of course.”

“Let’s go, Lady Anis,” Euphie said, tugging at my hand in invitation.

For a moment, fear nearly stopped me dead in my tracks, but Euphie’s warmth brought me back and propelled me forward.

We made our way straight to the parlor. Inside, I found my mother and father sitting hand in hand, and Lainie standing beside them. Duke Grantz and Lumi were similarly seated just a short distance away.

My mother, who was beside Lainie and my father, looked emaciated, a shell of her usual dignity and poise. In my mind, that

image overlapped with a distant memory of her, forcing my stomach to recoil in guilt and pain.

I held firmly to Euphie's hand, and she tightened her grip in turn.

Lainie was the first to notice us entering the room. "Lady Anis! Lady Euphyllia!"

At the sound of her voice, my mother quickly raised her head, staring at me wide-eyed before relinquishing my father's hand and rushing to my side. "Anisphia!"

"…Mother."

Not once did her gaze leave my face, and she approached with such haste that her footsteps loudly echoed through the room. Finally, by my side, she stared at me as though unsure how to begin.

My father approached behind her and opened his mouth as though to break the silence, but he, too, remained voiceless. Reeling in his presence, I could only give a vague shrug.

"Anisphia."

"F-Father…"

"You fool…! Why didn't you say something sooner?!"

I was shaken by this reprimand. He was just as surprised to see me recoil, and he frowned bitterly.

"Your Majesty, it was my suggestion that was responsible for Lady Anis's condition," Euphie said. "You should include me in your admonishments, sir."

"Euphyllia…"

"Additionally…Lady Anis, do you have anything to say? Or shall I?"

I caught my breath when Euphie turned suddenly to me, but then I quickly shook my head. As she let go of my hand, I stepped forward to address my parents. "…Father, Mother, I'm sorry for running off without warning."

My parents said nothing. I kept my head bowed and, without looking up, continued: "I… I thought I would be fine."

"…Fine?"

"I'm a royal princess, so I thought I could carry this burden. I thought I would be fine. That I *had* to be…" As I spoke, I fought desperately to keep my voice from trembling. I was so nervous I could have vomited up the contents of my stomach, but I had to say my piece. "If I couldn't, I thought I didn't deserve to call myself a

princess…that I didn't deserve to call myself your daughter."

I was too scared to dare look at my mother's reaction to all this, though I couldn't stop myself from hearing my father's audible gulp. Ah, I would have fled the scene all over again if I could've.

"I'm fine. Really. So forget what Euphie said; I'll—"

I'll be queen.

But before I could come out with those words, my mother caught me in a warm embrace.

She was a little shorter in stature than me, and yet her hug was remarkably strong, even a little painful. I almost thought she was going to crush me.

"Anisphia…! Y-you idiot!" she wept. Her body continued to tremble as she held me in her arms. "What makes you think it's all *fine*?! Do you think I don't understand the enormity of what you're being asked to do?! Do you even realize how much I hate to see you like this…?!"

"…I know. That's why I've been trying so hard. I've never forgotten how hard you cried when you realized I lacked magical talent."

"Then why don't you blame me?! You and Algard both! You ought to curse me, the both of you! I'm the one who made you both suffer! I'm the one who burdened you with all these royal responsibilities! As much as I claimed to understand your protests, I…I always turned a blind eye to you both, busying myself with diplomacy of all things!" My mother stared up at me, tears overflowing from her eyes. "What exactly is *fine* about all this?! You didn't want the throne, did you? You've always been fascinated by the outside world, by magic! And without magic, you honed your skills with the sword to enter the outside world yourself, developed your own theory of magicology, and made your magical tools, too! Do you expect me to believe you weren't heartbroken when you were told to dedicate yourself instead to the kingdom?!"

"Mother… I… I just—"

"*Just?!* Does it mean so little to you?! Why?!" She was clinging so tightly to me, her glare blinding, her breathing all but inaudible to the ear.

I couldn't hold back the emotions bottled up in my heart. "… Because I'm your daughter, the kingdom's First Princess…! Because I know how hard you and Father have been fighting to hold it all together! I didn't want to get in your way! I didn't want to fail your

expectations…! But as your daughter, I wanted to do *something* at least…!"

Otherwise, what would have been the point of my being born a royal princess?

I was nothing more than a nuisance. A princess from whom no one ever expected anything. When my mother learned of my lack of ability, she was hurt terribly, and my father suffered even more. If I had been born a regular, capable princess, neither of them would have had to struggle.

I couldn't betray my own wish, but that didn't mean I was oblivious to their affections. I knew they loved me, and that was why I was still here today.

For a member of the royal family, an inability to wield magic was a fatal handicap. I could have been cast out at any moment, but my parents continued to love me. Even when they disapproved of my actions, they still kept me firmly in their attentions.

Their love for me never wavered, and I was glad to have been born in this country. There had been so many difficulties and hurdles, but I had been able to overcome them with the help of my dreams.

And it was my father and mother who had enabled me to have those dreams. As such, now that they were in need, it was only natural for me, as a princess, to reach out to help.

"If Euphie would make a better queen…then why was I born a princess…? If Euphie would have made a better choice, then I've always been completely unnecessary…! A useless, unneeded princess…!"

Even if that option could save me, I didn't want to accept it. Because of who I was, I had caused so much trouble and ruined so many lives. In the end, Allie had been banished to the frontier, and now the succession itself was in jeopardy. At this rate, I would end up destroying the very kingdom my parents had fought so hard to protect.

I couldn't let that happen. I *had* to take on these responsibilities for myself. I had to fulfill the obligation that was mine from birth…

"My fool daughter, Anisphia," my mother said, releasing me from her embrace and placing a hand on my cheek. "Have I *ever* said you were unnecessary? You really haven't tried to understand your mother's feelings. You have no idea how overjoyed I was when you were born, do you?"

"…Mother."

"The gift of magic would never have mattered to me if you didn't want it. I've always known how much you cared about us, but I doubted how far you were willing to go." Her eyes were wet with tears, but still she continued to peer deep into my face. Before long, her face became blurry in my teary eyes.

"You don't really want to be queen. You want to study magic and be a mage, don't you? Ever since you were a child, that's all you've ever wanted, isn't it? I'm right, aren't I? If you take the throne, you'll lose your freedom. Are you happy with that?"

"…I—I wouldn't go that far…!"

She had come out with a sly question, one that I couldn't possibly answer. Still, my chest was full to bursting. If she could look at me and tell me that I was enough, then I was happy.

"It's all right. Mother…do you believe in me? As your daughter, I want to do my best…"

"…You silly child. What a fool you are…!"

My mother wrapped her arms around me once again. I couldn't hug her so strongly, but I rested a hand against her back so that I could feel more of her loving warmth.

"Anis…"

"…Father."

My father rested a hand on my shoulder. Still hugging my mother, I glanced up at him.

He bowed his head. "…I'm sorry."

"…Why are you apologizing?"

"I couldn't give you what you deserved. I treated you as an eccentric, shut away in the detached palace. I couldn't forgive you for what you really wanted."

"…What are you saying?"

"…I'm considering Euphyllia's proposal."

I couldn't comprehend what he had just said. I almost lashed out at him, when he held me by the shoulders. "Calm yourself. This is only assuming that she *can* secure a spirit covenant."

"Father!"

"Mistress Lumi said it herself. A spirit covenant is only possible if the person in question truly desires it. Indeed, if they really do want it, there's nothing anyone can do to stop it."

"But that's…!"

I swung my gaze to Euphie—but she remained motionless, as

though having long since made up her mind. She really had convinced herself to throw everything else away for my sake.

"What about me?!" I shouted in desperation. "If *I* could enter into a spirit covenant—"

Lumi shot me down immediately. "You can't."

"What do you mean, I can't?!" I screamed back in indignation.

"Because you're a traveler."

A *traveler*? I sucked in a breath at that word. The dragon I had fought a short while back had described me the same way.

"What's a *traveler*…?! And why can't they enter into spirit covenants?!"

"Travelers are the rarest of humans, individuals whose souls are pure and independent and who don't harbor spirits."

I stared back, agape. This was the first time I had ever heard of anything like this.

"My soul…doesn't harbor spirits…?"

"The soul of every living being in this world serves as an abode to spirits. When the spirits within one's soul resonate with other spirits of the same kind, they are transformed into magic. The reason why people have different magical affinities is because they have different spirits within their souls."

My eyes opened wider still at this explanation. There was nothing to hold me back from accepting her words. This was probably the truth—which meant I would never have any chance of wielding magic by myself.

"It's a rare thing, a true wonder to meet a traveler in person. You don't need to rely on magic or spirits to survive. People like you have always been at the forefront of changing times. You are a hero, a vessel capable of advancing the pages of history. To tell you the truth, I think your magical tools are incredible. That's why I want you to be queen."

"Huh…?"

"Spirit covenants should be a thing of the past. That's why, when necessary, I warn of the dangers of entering into them, why I even divulge the truth of what they entail. Why, you're wondering, do I think they should be abolished? Partly, it's because becoming a spirit covenantor means immortality. But do you know why you have a royal family?"

"No…"

The first ruler of the Kingdom of Palettia was a spirit

covenantor. Spirit covenantors were immortal. When those two ideas clicked together, a sudden chill coursed down my spine.

In that case, why wasn't the first ruler, imbued with immortality and absolute authority, still reigning?

"Spirit covenants lead to misfortune and sorrow. That's why I'm here to warn you, as your precursor. That's why I continue to reside in the kingdom."

"You're here…to prevent others from becoming spirit covenantors?"

"Yes. And the reason is simple. I've seen firsthand the tragedies they cause."

As Lumi conveyed the truth, I couldn't help thinking she looked as though she could have faded away then and there. She rested a hand on her chest and continued.

"My true name…is Lumielle René Palettia. I'm the daughter of the first king of Palettia, who tended to the final days of his reign and laid the foundation for the royal family as it exists today."

Chapter 8
For Whom Magic Exists

This story took place long ago, in an age before men and women put claim to the land.

This land, abundant in nature, was once harsh and ill-suited for human habitation. Monsters, born from the fertile environment would attack constantly, and the victims of their attacks only ever seemed to increase.

But the people had nowhere else to go. They were wanderers, left with no choice but to flee the fires of the world and take refuge in this land of monsters.

One day, a young man cried out in exhaustion at these endless trials. Why did such calamities have to constantly befall them? If there was salvation to be had, he said he would pay any price. He begged for help.

There was a voice that responded to his sincere wish, a spirit from this land of rich nature. That spirit heeded the young man's cry and entered into a covenant with him.

And so the Kingdom of Palettia, a radiant realm in an untouched land, was born.

* * *

"Mistress Lumi…is part of the royal family…? The daughter of the first king…?"

My father and mother were more surprised than everyone else by Lumi's—Lumielle's—confession. The individual in question could respond only with a shrug.

The way her platinum-blond hair fell over her shoulders was enough to convince me. Only the royal bloodline had hair that color—proof that she was one of our distant ancestors.

"It's true. You could call me a living witness to the history of the Kingdom of Palettia."

"…If you really are the daughter of the first king, why would you oppose the same kind of spirit covenants that your father used to found the kingdom?"

Lumielle's features glazed over at my question, leaving her

looking like an expressionless doll. She wasn't concealing her emotions, I realized—this was a wreckage of emotions that had been laid waste to long ago.

"Because they're what killed my father…or destroyed him, rather."

"Destroyed him…?"

"The Kingdom of Palettia was established during an age when this monster-rich land hadn't yet been developed to the extent it is now. The leaderless people who drifted here were constantly threatened by monsters. From what I was told, the situation was so dire that they could have been wiped out at any moment. It was to escape this danger that my father entered into his spirit covenant. But that was only the beginning of the comic tragedy that would ensue."

"A comic tragedy…?" I echoed. Those words had hit a strange nerve.

Lumielle gave me a single nod. "What exactly do you think a spirit covenant is?"

"Er, well… It's like making a contract with a spirit, right…?"

"But what does that really *involve*?"

No one standing in the room was prepared to answer this question. Spirit covenants were regarded as just that, promises made with spirits, and no one knew any more about them—which was why they were such a mystery.

"The spirit with which you perform the covenant dwells within yourself."

"Inside oneself…?"

"To be more precise, it's your other half—the spirit that has melded to your soul," Lumielle said, resting her hand against her chest.

She had said a moment ago that spirits were entwined with the souls of all living things. So the spirit with which one entered into a covenant was the same spirit that dwelled within her soul? I could hardly fathom what that must entail.

"The soul seeks out spirits in order to fill in its missing parts. The more spirits it seeks, the purer it will become, and the stronger your connection to this world."

"Purity of spirit…"

"Exactly. A spirit covenant means the complete assimilation of your soul into that spirit."

“What…?! So that’s why you’re immortal?!” I exclaimed with astonishment.

Why were spirit covenantors immortal? The answer, I now realized, was simple.

Because becoming a spirit covenantor meant being transformed *into* a spirit.

Spirits were fragments of the world. They were immutable, and they neither aged nor decayed. They might eventually transform into spirit stones, but they never lost their innate power or their essential existence.

“That’s right. Spirit covenantors are those who have transfigured their souls into spirits by entering into a pact. At that point, the body becomes nothing more than the spirit’s vessel. The spirit doesn’t change, and it doesn’t deteriorate, either.”

“And the state of the vessel is fixed, too…?”

“That’s the mechanism behind a covenantor’s immortality, but it has its drawbacks.”

“What kind?”

“Spirits, by nature, don’t originally have vessels. So by existing in the form of a person, they end up…deviating. When that discrepancy grows to be too much to handle, they will even abandon their vessel. Those who have reached that stage we call Elementals—or great spirits.”

I gasped. “What…?! So the spirits we’ve all been worshipping, they’re actually people?!”

“That’s what I’m saying. Humans originally labeled them gods, saviors who gave up their human form. It simply evolved into a religion directed toward spirits.”

“…Impossible…!”

In the end, the mysteries of the kingdom’s spiritualistic religion were all man-made, a monument to human sacrifice. There was no way this information could be divulged to the faithful.

This truth, that spirit covenants were neither mystical nor redemptive, weighed heavily on my mind.

“And there’s an additional problem with spirit covenants themselves,” Lumielle continued. “Becoming one with the spirit by entering into a covenant means surrendering your humanity. That is the price exacted by the pact. If you are not willing to abandon your humanity, it simply won’t work. And once entered into, the spirit covenantor will be bound by the wish that enabled the pact.”

“Bound by their wish…?”

“That’s the tragedy of spirit covenantors. My father wished for the happiness of the people. He wanted to free them from suffering. To that end, he dedicated his soul and became a king who was one with the spirits.” Lumielle paused there, glancing down at her feet to conceal her grief. “Through that covenant, my father drew on the power of the spirits to create magic. In order to increase the number of people capable of wielding magic, the covenant expanded to encompass more individuals. Everyone did their very best to alleviate the hardships endured by their brothers and sisters. Such was the beginning of the royal and noble lineages. And yet…”

“…And yet…?”

“The magic that he pioneered laid the foundation for the entire kingdom. The lives of the people did improve, but there was no end to their desires.” Lumielle’s cold voice cut through the air like a razor-sharp blade.

A tremble shot down my spine in the face of her ruthless anger—proof enough that her emotions had turned bone-chillingly cold.

“Those prayers for a better life were soon replaced by cravings for greater luxury—and the king who stood up for his country existed no longer to answer prayers, but to fulfill desires.”

“No…”

“Are you beginning to understand? You must be able to imagine how I felt as I watched my beloved people succumb to ever greater greed, as my king invaded other countries, annihilating them without so much as raising an eyebrow, never suspecting that he wasn’t acting to secure his people’s happiness. I didn’t question it at first, but that’s what a spirit covenant is. They create monsters blind to everything but the wish that they sought to fulfill.”

“…Didn’t you question him at all?”

“That was my covenant, to be the king’s daughter. To follow in his footsteps as an eternal symbol for the people and to take up his mantle if something should ever happen to him. But for his subjects, the king became nothing more than a convenient granter of wishes, and they kept on turning to him to fulfill their every desire. Do you know what the result was?!” Her countenance contorting as though she could either smile or else give in to despair, Lumielle cried out to the faces gathered in the room. “An immortal king possessed of overwhelming power, scattering people to the wind! He responded to his subjects’ wishes not only to repel invaders, but to raze entire

countries to the ground! What would *you* all do in the face of that?! What would you consider the right course of action?!"

Lumielle barked a laugh, but her voice was dry and rasping. She must have reflected on all this so many times that she didn't have the tears for it anymore. My heart ached at the thought.

"So I destroyed him! My own father! Because I had become convinced that what he was doing was wrong!"

I clenched my fists at Lumielle's desperate cry. No doubt, if I had been in her situation, I would have done the same thing, too.

A king like that was nothing less than a monster. He would have to be stopped.

"I did it to stop the kingdom and its people from spiraling out of control! Fortunately, the power of magic had already been passed on to younger generations, who had no need to enter into a full spirit covenant. So I erased all knowledge of covenants! The realm had no need for them! It would be better for those chasing after them to crumble away!" Lumielle paused there and shook her head with regret.

It was clear she had witnessed great horrors over the course of her long life.

"…But even then, some spirit covenantors continued to appear. Some became Elementals and disappeared. Once you're willing to surrender yourself to make a wish come true, there can be no stopping a spirit covenant. However, the number of people entering into them has decreased with the royal family and the nobility inheriting the gift of magic. That power has served to protect the country… But it still ended up causing another tragedy."

My father, mother, and Duke Grantz all looked to Lumielle warily. After all, they had been involved in the previous conflict that had erupted all because of that very magic.

Perhaps there was no clear wrongdoing or wrongdoer. If not for what had happened then, we wouldn't be here today. But we couldn't keep on making the same mistakes.

Those actions had all started out right—but gradually, good intentions became warped.

It was our duty to make it better again. That's what this story was about. It certainly was both comedy and tragedy at the same time.

"This a repeat of what happened then, all over again. Do you really want this? How can you be sure you won't be led astray,

Euphyllia?"

The strength of Lumielle's appeal made Euphie look away. When finally she raised her head proudly and caught me in her sights, my heart froze. "No, this *isn't* a repeat," she insisted. "Mistress Lumielle, I don't want a spirit covenant to revive the kingdom—just to give me the legitimacy to inherit the throne."

"What's the difference? Why do you want to be queen, then?"

"To put an end to these traditions that have been blindly passed down through the generations. So that everyone can journey into a new era. And the person who will lead us there…is already here," Euphie declared in a soft voice.

Lumielle's gaze passed from Euphie to me—as did everyone else's.

"I'm going to bring an end to this inherited age of magic and hand the future over to Lady Anis in the hope that she can usher the people forward. That's why I want to be queen. To build a future where magic isn't a noble privilege but can be used by anyone if they wish it. And as the cornerstone of that future, I will be the final legend."

"…You would reestablish the ancient right of kings and then reject it? Would you consign yourself to become a symbol of the old for the new age that this child will usher in?"

"That's my destiny to fulfill."

"If all you want is to bring in a new era, why must *you* be the cornerstone?"

"Maybe it doesn't need to be me, but *someone* needs to do it." Euphie paused there and walked within arm's reach of me. Her eyes as she faced me were filled with warmth and tenderness. "Lady Anis alone can only change the kingdom's current trajectory by destroying it, by denying the values of the past and overwriting them with new ones. It would be a betrayal."

"…A betrayal?" Lumielle frowned in suspicion.

"Magic is a hope for the future," Euphie continued. "That's why we yearn for it, but the magic that ought to be our salvation has always denied Lady Anis. The kingdom continues to deny it to her, praising only its past glories and traditions. What is that if not a betrayal?"

All of a sudden, my vision clouded. I blinked a few times, but everything was so blurry.

Euphie's outstretched hand grazed my cheeks. Only then did I

realize I was in tears.

"I don't want to let magic betray her any longer. If I'm a genius, a magical prodigy, then I have to do something to show for it, something only I can do. I have to *believe*. Magic is a hope for the future that we all cherish in our hearts."

"Euphie…"

"I *will* be queen, one capable of spreading your dreams throughout the land. You don't have to take on that role. You can be whatever you want. I'll support you, Lady Anis. More than anyone."

…Had magic betrayed me…? There could be no denying it. No matter how I longed for it, I had never been able to wield it, yet I couldn't stop chasing it. I had endeavored to unravel the mysteries of magic using the knowledge I brought from my past life. I had created magical tools—a new form of magic I *could* wield by myself. Even then, people continued to censure me, to say I wasn't appropriate as a royal princess. Not a day had gone by that I hadn't suffered unceasing rejection.

I simply learned to stop expecting anything. I didn't need anyone's approval. I still loved magic…and that was all I needed.

"That's enough." I took Euphie's hand, still pressed up against my cheek, in my own, and guided it away. The frustration, sorrow, anger, resentment, and bitterness that had long built up inside me all seemed to melt away. "Really, that's enough…"

I was fine now. She didn't have to try to save me anymore.

"Thank you, Euphie. But you know? I'll be all right."

As I said this, I watched as her face distorted in pain, in sorrow, even in anger. It came as a relief to see that she could still make such a grimace.

There was no need for her to go so far. Really, I would survive this.

If the magic in which I believed could benefit people in the future, I was fine with taking the throne. Even if it wasn't what I had always wanted, even if I would still be denied by others in the days to come.

Because the one I admired more than anyone had acknowledged me. Wasn't that enough? She had already given me far more than she had to.

I'll be fine, Euphie. I know you're not convinced, but it's the truth.

"Euphie, I won't give up, but I know you won't, either. So let's

have a contest. If I win—I want you to completely drop this idea of becoming queen yourself."

I pushed her away, taking both physical and literal distance from her.

She didn't have to save me. She had already done more than enough to help. I was fine now. I could stand on my own two feet. I could believe in my own magic. No matter how painful it might be, no matter how trying, I wouldn't lose.

And I wouldn't let *her* lose everything, either.

"Talking won't be enough to resolve this. In that case, I suppose we'll have to decide this through a duel. If that's the only way to get you to agree, of course."

"…I understand."

"Euphyllia?!" my father cried.

"What on earth are you both saying?!" my mother added.

"Father, Mother. I know what you're thinking, but neither of us is willing to surrender here. One of us will have to make the other accept our resolve."

I urged my parents not to intervene and fixed Euphie in my sights. As though having already accepted my challenge, her eyes were aflame with fiery determination.

"I don't want to force you to be queen."

"I don't want to force you to give up everything."

"We're at an impasse, then."

"We are."

"In that case…"

"…Let's settle this."

I was no match for Euphie, not only in magical ability, but also when it came to political maneuvering and tactics.

But I *was* a princess. As a direct descendant of the royal family, I couldn't surrender my right to the throne. Especially not if she was willing to risk her own existence to take it from me.

You don't need to sacrifice yourself for me, Euphie. You've already saved me more than you know.

* * *

At the exact same place where I had fought Allie, Euphie and I now stood directly across from one another.

I clutched a Mana Blade in my hands, while Euphie was wielding the Arc-en-Ciel.

Everyone had come out to watch us do battle, but I was focusing my attention on Euphie, wondering how we had reached this point.

Not that long ago, I had accidentally crashed into the banquet at the Aristocratic Academy on the back of my Witch's Broom. There, I had found Euphie, stunned and in tears.

The person standing across from me now bore no resemblance to the girl in that fond memory. She was as cold as ice, as honed as a knife. If I let my guard down for so much as a second, her determination would swallow me whole.

"…Euphie, let me ask you one more time: Won't you change your mind?"

"This is necessary. To bring this outdated era to an end, *someone* needs to bear that responsibility, just as you'll be the one to carry us into a new age."

"So you'll give up your humanity for that? You'll shoulder that burden all by yourself? I can change this country without your meddling."

"Yes, you can, but only by destroying the previous age. That said, I believe someone has to connect your future to our shared past."

"That doesn't mean you need to sacrifice yourself, Euphie!" I cried, my Mana Blade activating as though in response to my indignation.

I glared across at her, yet Euphie didn't waver in the slightest. "And I don't want to sacrifice you for the country, either," she said, returning my gaze. "This burden was never meant to be yours. It only fell on you because of my poor judgment and mistakes."

"If you're talking about Allie, that wasn't all your fault! If you trace those problems back to their origin, *I'm* to blame!"

"But why do you have to fix all the kingdom's problems by yourself? That responsibility is too much for you to shoulder alone!" Euphie stared across at me in defiance, raising the Arc-en-Ciel. "I understand the value of magicology, and I've experienced its potential for myself. You will be indispensable to help build this kingdom's future, Lady Anis. We need everything—your dreams, your heart. I can't afford to lose you!"

"What…? How can you say that…?"

“I must do this to make sure you don’t give up all hope for magic. If magic won’t save you eventually, then you’ll forsake it. You’ll use magic to save the people, but you’ll forget yourself. And if you do that, the magic that *you* believe in will be lost forever.”

“I would never…,” I trailed off. That protest felt weak even to me.

Euphie continued to pile on her verbal assault. “No, it’s true. The magic of today may not have been enough to make your wishes come true, but that’s because the gift of the spirits is nothing more than a mirror of human wishes.”

“Euphie…!”

“I believe in you, Lady Anis. I’m sure you can use magic to fly to ever greater heights. You’ve already proven that you can soar through the sky.”

Euphie’s hair swayed softly around her. Her innate magic was already building up power.

“There’s no contradiction between magic and your ideals. They can embark into the future, hand in hand. That’s why we need to signal an end to the old ways! To give this country a new future! As a magic wielder who has stood by you, I’m here to affirm your ideals! The kingdom is still too young to place in your hands, and your ideals still have so much more room to grow!”

Euphie’s eyes were filled with fire, and while they were wet with tears, there could be no denying the light of her will shining through.

“Someday, your time will come. I’ll make sure it does, by building a new future. And when that happens, I want to live by your side.”

“But I don’t want my dreams to come true at your expense, Euphie! You don’t have to go this far! I—”

“Don’t say you’re *fine* with it! Look at you! You’re not! You’ve been crying! If you really were fine, you wouldn’t need to say it so many times!”

“Stop, please…!”

“No! I’ll say it again! You *aren’t* fine, so stop pretending you are! I’ll help you, just like you did for me! As many times as I need to! This time, I’ll take *your* hand!”

As we cried out at one another, a gust of wind swept between us.

Our views were at odds, unable to find common ground. We

both valued the other, yet remained so incredibly far apart. And so we each stepped forward, hoping to close that distance.

As I brought my Mana Blade down in an attempt to break past her stubborn resolve, Euphie poured her magical energy into the Arc-en-Ciel to resist me.

Neither of us faltered as the two swords crashed into each other, magical power shooting out in spark-like bursts. But while Euphie only had the Arc-en-Ciel, I had two Mana Blades and swung my additional one straight for her neck.

Euphie stepped back as though in a dance, the strike passing her by with only a finger's width to spare. With minimal movement, she stepped forward once more, her Arc-en-Ciel careening down from above.

Reflexively, I kicked the ground, leaping backward—only realizing my mistake when I saw Euphie's magical technique activate.

"Air Needle!"

I leaped to the side to dodge the stab of air that came flying toward me. Euphie didn't waste a second before following through with yet more wild thrusts into the air around me.

Countless Air Needles gouged deep gashes through the ground. I paused to regain my stance and circled around Euphie to dodge the barrage.

For a second, her breathing paused, and the bombardment likewise stopped. At that moment, I leaped forward to unleash a powerful strike of my own.

"—!"

I had aimed straight for her neck, hoping to knock her out cold—but my target was too narrow. That being the case, I adjusted the trajectory of my blow, turning next to her torso—when my Mana Blade was caught in midair by her Arc-en-Ciel.

Once more, the two weapons rebounded as they made contact. Taking advantage of that momentum, I brought my other Mana Blade around in a wide swing—but just as I was all but certain I had made contact, Euphie leaped into the air, twisting her body to evade in an athletic maneuver that seemed to defy gravity.

—! She's floating?! Is this her flight magic?!

I was so taken aback that my response was delayed. Yet Euphie wasted no time twisting through the air and sweeping across with the Arc-en-Ciel.

I raised my Mana Blade to parry the strike, but her magic-infused weapon was heavier than I had imagined. The repulsive power of each weapon ended up cutting through the other; the two blades collided like real swords interlocking.

Having landed firmly on the ground, Euphie and I stood neck and neck, warding off the other's blade with our own, as though we were caught up in an old-fashioned duel. She was baring her teeth more frantically than I had ever before seen.

I called out to her. "Why are you…so desperate to win…?!"

Letting my emotions take over, I pushed back against the Arc-en-Ciel and poured my energy into the Impressed Seal on my back to draw out my dragon magic, channeling it into my Mana Blade and striking out again.

That certainly hadn't been a simple trick to carry out, but Euphie's counter was more adept. Given the solid foundation underlying her abilities and her regular training, that was perhaps understandable. At their heart, both our fighting styles were rooted in swordplay.

She fought using orthodox forms and techniques, while I had developed my own style as an adventurer. Even so, the basics were the same, and we were equals in skill.

Maybe that was why I could feel her diligence so acutely as our blades crossed. She really had earned her reputation.

Perhaps she, too, had only ever lived her life a certain way. That was maybe a shameful flaw of hers, but still, she had dedicated herself to the fullest.

In that case, she ought to be rewarded. No one who had worked as hard as she had should be left empty-handed.

"Don't you get it…?! I'm fine with it all!"

"And I'll repeat the exact same words back to you!" This time, she lashed out with the Arc-en-Ciel, crying out as she turned her blade against me, "I'm the one who's fine! I don't consider it a sacrifice! It's about more than me! I can't let you take over the throne knowing full well it will make you suffer!"

"But it's my duty…!"

"And all this time we were happy for you to abandon that duty! You can't expect to pick up the pieces now and shoulder it all yourself, can you?! You can say *no*!"

"Then why won't you respect my *no* to what you're trying to do?!"

I deflected Euphie's blow with all my strength. Having secured a little space, I heaved my shoulders, trying to steady my breathing, yet my trembling hands betrayed my true state.

"You deserve better than this, Euphie! I was in too much pain to understand what I was supposed to do! And now you're trying to give me the freedom to live however I want? Why are you trying to carry everything for me?! Why can't you spare a thought for your own happiness?!"

"Why do you only allow others to have good things?! Why never yourself?!" Euphie shouted back, the pain in her voice like a knife in my chest. "There are people who suffer when they see you unhappy! You might be able to offer them relief by pretending to be fine, but that doesn't mean *you're* happy!"

"Then stop pinning your hopes on me! It hurts! It hurts so much! You don't need to want anything for my sake! You don't need to take my place!"

"…Yes, that's right. No one could ever replace you, Lady Anis." Euphie paused there, her passions cooling so profoundly that her attitude now belied her previous fervor. There was a silent plea in her eyes. "You're irreplaceable. Really, who else can do what you can?"

"…Euphie."

"But when it comes to ruling, I *can* replace you! But you're unique, one of a kind! Your ideas, your dreams for the future! We don't need you to be queen if it means losing all that! I just want you to be who you really are!"

Her feelings sent fissures running through my heart. I wanted to scream, but I shook my head instead. "Stop it! I don't need any of that! That isn't… That isn't what I want!"

"Then *I* want it! I'll keep on defending your wishes until you're ready to forgive yourself!"

"…!"

"If you really want to take the throne, if that's what you actually want, then convince me! That's why we're here, isn't it? Then persuade me! But how are you going to do it? Look at you…! You're clearly hurting inside!"

"No, I'm not!"

I could withstand this pain. It wasn't enough to overpower me. *So please*, I whispered, *don't force me to lay it bare.*

This level of sadness could be forgotten. *Don't delve too deep.*

The words came crashing out of my mouth before I could stop myself. “No! I hate it! I hate it! I *hate*, *hate*, *hate* it!”

Huh? Who or what exactly did I hate? My heart had cracked, and I didn’t even know the reason. It had clearly broken, though; it was shrieking now…but precisely what had broken in me?

My mind was a mess, my thoughts all over the place. I didn’t know what to think anymore. I just kept rambling.

“Fine! No one has to get hurt! If I give in, if I accept it, it will be over! So why are you pushing me so hard?! You say you’re only trying to protect me, but if you really don’t want to hurt me, then stop it! This is enough! All of it! You’ve shown me more than enough consideration!”

So please, give up on that insane idea. Give up on me. I’ll survive.

“I don’t know how badly you’re hurting, Lady Anis. You might be able to approach those wounds, but you can’t heal them.” Euphie spoke softly, though the fact that she still hadn’t relaxed her fighting stance was proof she wasn’t about to relent. “I can’t let you keep getting hurt. I can’t let you give up because of the injuries you’ve suffered. I can’t tolerate a world that insists on destroying your dreams. But this world will continue to deny your very existence. I want to change it. If those feelings of mine end up hurting you…” She let out a weak exhale.

Her words, her gentle smile directed at me alone, carved straight to my heart.

“I’ll be your only wound. I’ll leave a scar that will never give up on you. And I’ll make up for the other scars I’ve inflicted. If you want to resent me, I won’t stop you. I’ll spare no effort to overcome your enmity. Even if you hate me, even if you hold it against me forever…I’ll keep on wishing for your happiness.” Her expression was clear and unclouded, conveying a depth of feeling strong enough to tear one’s heart out.

“I can’t stand to see you in tears and giving up. You showed me the world of your dreams, Lady Anis, and that’s your responsibility now. I’m going to hold you to it. More than anything in the world, I want you to be happy.”

Ahhh, she’s so cruel.

I felt my strength leaving me, as though a hole had been

opened in my heart. I almost ended up dropping the Mana Blades I was holding on to so tightly.

She was sly. She was guileful. If she refused to let this drop no matter what I did, then no words would be able to stop her. That was how badly she wanted me to be happy.

It hurt so very much. I could have broken down into sobs. I could already feel the heat building up behind my eyes, and I raised a hand to wipe away the tears.

"Aerial System: Dragon Heart."

I filled my entire body with dragon magic, until I almost screamed from the pressure building up inside me.

Tears rolled down my cheeks, but I could do nothing to stop them. I glared at Euphie, clenching my hands that had been sapped of all strength.

I hadn't yet confronted her with everything that I had—and for that reason, I couldn't let myself go along with her just yet.

"If I can't convince you with words, will you accept this?! If you're going to withdraw, now's the time! I'll never forgive you if this costs you your life! I'll hate you forever! I don't want to give in, either! I don't want to see you embark down a path of suffering, so I won't lose to you…! I *can't* lose!"

My Mana Blades began to emanate a crackling sound. Trying this technique with just one had led to it being damaged during my battle with Allie, but this time, I was channeling my energy through two, giving me more latitude to increase my power.

Against Allie, this technique had delivered a deadly injury that had almost incapacitated him, even as a vampire. If Euphie were to take the blow head-on, it could end up killing her.

Please withdraw, I prayed. But I knew her too well, her straightforward earnestness. She wouldn't fall back.

"If this is what it takes to heal your pain, I won't let you win. I'll take everything you have!" she cried out to me.

"Stop lying! I hate it!"

I would deal her the most powerful blow I could manage. I poured my dragon magic into the Mana Blades, which swelled to such a size that I could hardly maintain their original form as they took on a clawlike shape.

After a moment's hesitation, I swung the blades with tremendous force, hoping to shake off my indecision. If she was capable of accepting this, I prayed, please, do it.

Euphie held the Arc-en-Ciel in front of her as she followed the approaching Mana Blades. Her eyes lit up in all the shades of a prism reflecting light—red, blue, yellow, green, purple, white.

At that instant, the magical energy surrounding her swelled, flooding the area with an intimidating aura.

"Gather and mingle," came her voice, an inorganic sound stripped of emotion. "Combine and take form."

There was no mistaking it—the quality of her magical energy was changing. I could feel it on my skin. Like that, the wind picked up, and a force began to swirl around her, centered on the Arc-en-Ciel.

The weapon in her hands lit up, the six colors melting into the metal as though being sucked in. And then…a rainbow-colored blade unfurled like a flower coming into bloom.

"Lady Anis!" she thundered. Her eyes, glowing like a rainbow, stared my way with indomitable will.

Those eyes drew me in—and for that moment, she and I might as well have been the only two people in the world.

"This is the power you introduced me to! The future you dreamed of! I'll show you just what you're giving up…!" Euphie declared forcefully.

She was referring, it seemed, to a realm no one had yet to reach. Not even the spirit covenantors of the past had been able to come this far.

It was a crystal born by blending the oldest of legends with the most recent of extraordinary feats.

An illusion only she, the highest pinnacle of magic, could bring into being, which gradually took shape before me.

The rainbow-colored light converged, taking on a crystalline outline, as though the sword itself was comprised of spirit stones.

She raised her rainbow blade, dazzling with a brilliant light—and brought it straight down toward my own Mana Blade.

"Arc-en-Ciel."

She called out the name of the magical blade I had gifted her—

and my vision was flooded by an all-encompassing light.

In the midst of that burning glow, I spotted a rainbow.

It approached furiously, sweeping over me and sending my mind into darkness.

* * *

When I came to, the rainbow that had filled my vision still lingered, all but burned into my eyelids.

Slowly, I opened my eyes. The first thing that spread out before me was the blue sky. Only then did I realize I was lying on my back.

I couldn't tell how long I had been out cold. But as I let my gaze wander, I noticed that my two Mana Blades were nowhere to be seen.

"…Lady Anis."

Euphie was there, kneeling down beside me.

In her hands, she grasped the Mana Blades that should have been in my possession. Once I saw that she had returned the Arc-en-Ciel to its scabbard, I understood precisely what had happened.

…*Oh, I lost.*

Failure washed over me, sapping me of energy. I couldn't even remember how much strength I had poured into my body.

"…Euphie."

"Yes?"

"…That was beautiful, really."

That rainbowlike light still glowed in the back of my mind. A single notion occupied my thoughts—that it was absolutely stunning.

By myself, I could never create that wonderful light—and as I found the will to admit that truth, tears began to spill down my cheeks.

I was overjoyed to have been able to witness it for myself. It had filled me with a crystalline realization.

What the nobles of this kingdom, what its magic wielders couldn't stop pursuing was that rainbow light.

"I couldn't…win…"

I *was* strong. I certainly hadn't intended to lose.

But this outcome was the result of prayer itself. A precious feeling dedicated to the world. I had witnessed something beautiful,

a glorious sight that called to mind the longing I had discovered when I first learned of the existence of magic.

"…Euphie."

"Yes?"

"…That wasn't fair."

"I know."

"…Y-you're so mean…!"

I wanted to use magic like that. A wave of jealousy, of regret, or resentment rose up inside me.

Euphie had everything I had ever wanted—and I hated her for it.

"Lady Anis, you're the one who brought me this far." She took my hand in her own, wrapping her palm gently around it. "I couldn't have done anything like this on my own. I never would have loved the world so much had it not been for you. It's only this beautiful because *you're* in it." She tugged at my hand, catching me as I rose to my feet. "The world is beautiful because of you. I don't want to lose this time living with you today. If you can see this amazing beauty, then please…love yourself as well."

Those words pierced my heart and seeped deep inside. I had been ready to reject them, to turn them away, but I could offer no resistance. I had no choice but to accept them as they were.

"Euphie…I— I…"

"Yes. I'm listening."

"I'm sorry…! I… I was never *fine* with this…! How could I be…?!"

I couldn't do it. I couldn't. There was no way I could create that beautiful magic Euphie had just performed—and without it, I would never be able to convince everyone to accept me. If that beauty was what they wanted in a ruler, then I would be nothing more than a warped semblance of a queen.

There, I had admitted it. Euphie was much, much better suited to the role than I was. She would become a queen welcomed by everyone.

But you know what? Maybe I could afford to flatter myself, too…? After all, it was only thanks to me that she had made it all this way. It was thanks to *my* magic that she was capable of shining so brightly.

Could I be content with that? Was that enough for me to fulfill my duty…?

“I told you, didn’t I? There will come a time when people *will* want you. You don’t have to keep struggling to find it yourself. I’ll take your hand. I need you…no one else but you.”

…What name was I to give this feeling that welled up inside me? There I was, weeping like a child as I clung to her. Unable to maintain appearances any longer, I wept, letting out everything I had held in for so long.

All the while, Euphie stroked my back. Her touch had saved me. I surrendered myself to that feeling.

…How long did we remain that way? Finally, once I had calmed down, Euphie took me by the hand, helping me to my feet.

No sooner did I stand up than my mother rushed toward me. But before she could reach my side, she stopped, staring uncertainly at my outstretched hand.

At this sight, I let go of Euphie and approached my mother, hanging her head without making eye contact.

“…Anis, I…”

“Mother… I’m sorry. I guess…I’m not cut out to be queen, after all…”

I had difficulty flashing her a proper smile, so I twisted my lips in a strange, embarrassed attempt at one. Still, I was able to let out a weak chuckle. My heart filled with regret, leaving me on the verge of breaking down in tears all over again.

“I’m sorry…for being such a useless daughter…”

“In that case, you should blame *me* for being such a poor mother!” My apology must have sparked my mother’s anger, as her voice rang out loudly. “You should resent me for being a helpless excuse of a parent, unable to bring out her daughter’s true feelings, incapable of supporting her!”

“Mother… That’s not… I…”

“Whose fault is it that you can’t use magic?! Not yours, certainly! But you’ve been shouldering this burden all this time! I knew it had to be painful, unbearable even, but I did nothing in the name of duty…!”

“…But, Mother, I’m still your daughter.”

I wrapped my arms around her trembling body, catching her in an embrace. I knew that she wanted forgiveness just as much as I did. Everything would be all right.

“I wanted to be a daughter you could be proud of…”

“Anis…?”

“I thought if I could use magic, you would be proud to call me your daughter…”

“A-Anis…! How could you…? Why…?” Her hands on my back shook violently.

“…I’m sorry, Mother,” I said, holding her tightly. “I knew you loved me. That’s what made it all so hard to bear. I was born the way I was, so this was the only life I could choose…”

“You… Why would you…?”

“Because it hurt…to see you blame yourself for my inability to use magic.”

My mother looked up at me, astonishment in her wounded expression. “There’s nothing wrong with you,” she said, gritting her teeth in pain. “Nothing at all. You’re a wonderful daughter… Too good for the likes of me.”

“Mother…”

“I was too weak to say anything. I did nothing to help you. I’m sorry I couldn’t speak up. I’m the one who should be asking for forgiveness.”

“You don’t need to apologize, Mother.”

“I know you don’t need my apology. Your resolve to take on our burdens is why you’re in so much pain. But if I run away from this, I have no right to call myself your mother, Anis.”

She released me from her embrace and took my hands in her own. At that moment, a truly peaceful expression fell over her, and a solitary tear ran down my cheek.

“…I’m glad to hear your true feelings, Anis. You don’t want to be queen, do you?”

“…No.”

“And it will be hard for you to let Euphie take on that role instead, won’t it? Because you consider it a great sacrifice, don’t you?”

“Yes…”

“Then you should do your best to help the kingdom by being yourself. I’m sure you can do it. If you still want to be queen, go for it. If you don’t, I’m sure you can think of countless other ways to help your country. So believe in who you are. Your personality—your identity—is your greatest strength. You’ve been saving me all your life, Anis. Trust me on this.”

“…Mother…!”

“You’ve been doing your best for so very long, but you don’t

have to keep going it alone."

I felt my tears welling up anew at these words and held fast to my mother's neck. She in turn wrapped me in a strong embrace.

This was enough for me. With this, I felt like my life's efforts had paid off.

My value had been recognized not as a member of the royalty family, but as the person I wanted to be.

Somehow, it felt also as though Euphie was watching over me, and that sensation came as an indescribable relief.

CHAPTER 9 Peeling Off the Mask

After I broke down into tears with my mother, it was decided that we would postpone any discussion of the future until we could all approach the matter calmly.

That night, I stepped out from my quarters. I was heading for Euphie's bedroom.

So much had happened during the day, and to be honest, I had been so stressed that I was worried my head might explode. However, I now believed everything had turned out for the best.

I didn't doubt the depth of Euphie's feelings or her willingness to give up everything for me, but if I was going to accept her resolution, we needed to exchange a few more words.

…After all, I had a secret I had never revealed to anyone, and something was urging me to share it with her. I wanted her to know everything.

"…Euphie? Are you still awake?" I asked, knocking softly on her door.

As embarrassed as I was to admit it, my reticence did seem to suggest that I still harbored lingering doubts.

There was no response. I was about to give up, when finally Euphie's voice echoed back.

Slowly, the door opened, and the person whom I had come to see appeared in her sleeping gown.

"Lady Anis?"

"Ah… S-sorry. I know it's late."

"No, not at all. Do you want to come inside?"

With that invitation, I stepped into the room. Euphie sat down on the edge of the bed, patting the blanket beside her in invitation.

"Thank you, um, for giving me the time," I stammered, taking the beckoned seat.

"Not at all. I've been thinking there's a lot that we should discuss, too, Lady Anis."

Her warm response helped alleviate my nerves. Nonetheless, I still couldn't put a proper string of words together, and the room descended into silence.

In the meantime, Euphie waited patiently for me to find my

voice. That long moment of quiet stretching out between us filled me with a sense of comfort. Immersed in that silence, my words gradually began to fit together.

"I've been thinking what I should say first… So I'll start by saying thank you, Euphie."

"I haven't done anything deserving of your thanks…"

"No way. When you decided you wanted to take the throne, you were thinking about me, weren't you…? So thank you." I paused there, clenching my fists a little as I looked up at her. "I was happy, of course—but I couldn't accept it so easily. I'm still a royal princess after all. Maybe you'd be more suited to rule, though. If you really can enter into a spirit covenant, maybe you should be queen. But still… This is different from giving up as a princess from the very beginning."

"I can see how much you value being a princess, Lady Anis… Or rather, being your parents' daughter." Euphie's expression tensed, and she quietly bowed her head.

I startled, staring back wide-eyed.

"I was so focused on why you didn't want to be queen that I never stopped to truly consider your feelings," Euphie continued. "I'm sorry."

"N-no! You don't need to apologize! To be honest, I was also a little surprised…"

As Euphie began to apologize, I hurried to stop her. This wasn't what I had come to talk about, and it hadn't been my intention to embarrass her by taking such a half-hearted attitude.

I took a few deep breaths, inhaling deeply. Thanks to her, I felt a little more relaxed now. I might not have been able to completely unravel my tension, but at least I could now state what I had come here to convey.

"…There's a reason why I was so insistent on being a princess—on being my parents' daughter."

"What reason…?"

"I've kept it a secret for so long now. I've never shared this with anyone. I was always afraid that someone might find out. That's how grave a matter this is."

"…You haven't told anyone at all? Not even Ilia or Tilty?"

"Nope. No one… You're the first person I ever thought to confide this in, Euphie."

Her eyes widened in astonishment as I said this. She sat up

straight, turning to face me, her expression so serious that I could almost feel the pressure.

"If it's that important, you have my full attention. You've never even considered letting anyone know this before, you said?"

"…Yep. I was going to keep it buried inside me until the day I die." I took a deep breath, hoping to calm myself. "Euphie, can you take this secret with you to the grave?"

"I swear. I'll never divulge it to anyone."

Her direct gaze, her sincere words, were enough to help me take the last step. And so I revealed to her a truth I had considered impossible to share with anyone.

"…I have memories of a past life."

"…A past life?"

I had to hold back a shiver as I made my confession. Euphie, too, fell silent.

A look of silent consternation fell over her as she processed my words, but I had to drive home the point.

"I've known it since my earliest memories. It's a life that isn't mine."

"…I'm sorry; I can't understand what you're trying to say."

"Well, how should I put it? Before I was born as *me*, I was someone else—and I still have memories of that time."

"…How can that be possible?"

"The proof is in magicology. I never once questioned whether it was possible to soar through the sky with magic—I *knew* it was. That's why I developed my research."

"…What you're saying is that magicology is based on the memories of someone else?"

"Yes. Memories of a past life in a previous world. I used those recollections to devise magicology. The concept of past lives is a well-recognized ideology in that world. I've got a lot of other knowledge from that place, too."

"…I see. From what you're saying, that world you remember must have been much more advanced than this one."

"Well, I guess so. I can't deny it. The biggest difference is that magic exists in this world, but it didn't in the one I remember."

Euphie's eyes widened even more, her astonishment plain to

see. In all the time I had known her, she had never looked so startled.

"Magic didn't exist? Don't you mean that it just hadn't been developed yet?"

"As far as my memories go, science and technology seemed to occupy the place of magic."

"A civilization where magic doesn't exist…? But your magicology is based on your memories of that life, no? So you're saying people there were capable of all that, of flying through the sky, even *without* magic…?"

"I guess so, right?"

Euphie's face blanched as she mouthed the word *impossible*.

I doubted she thought I was lying, but it was clearly a difficult concept for her to grasp. I let out a soft chuckle.

"There's nothing particularly strange about it. Instead of magic, they developed tools. I mean, horse-drawn carriages and other vehicles are a good analogy, right?"

"Horse-drawn carriages?"

"Yeah. In the world of my past life, they were already obsolete. People used iron vehicles capable of driving themselves without the need for horses or magic. And it wasn't just for people of status, either. Everyone used them—ordinary people, too."

"…Iron vehicles that drove themselves? Without using magic or horses…?"

"Yeah. And the reason why I knew it was possible to fly is because I remember another thing, too—an iron vehicle capable of flight, something called an airplane. Anyone could use it so long as they paid for it. Can you imagine?"

"…I see… No wonder. If you could remember such a thing, flying would obviously seem possible. Still, it's difficult to fully grasp, and it makes you wonder… If there was no magic in that world, where did you get your ideas for magicology from?" Euphie asked, raising a questioning eyebrow.

I couldn't help but let out a chuckle at the sight of her expression there. "Well… Magic didn't really exist as such, but it was a common element in fantasy stories and the like. There were so many tales of wishes and hopes. People liked to imagine what life would be like if it *did* exist."

"Was it a myth, then?"

"Yes. I was so drawn to those stories that my own values

changed, leaving only a powerful fascination with magic. I wanted to use it myself, so I strove to develop a magic that I could use. That's how it all started."

"So you mean that magic wasn't a necessity, like it is here, but was sought after freely, like in a fairy tale?"

"I think that's the closest interpretation. At least, that's why magic has always been an object of admiration for me."

That was where it all started, my point of origin. That day when I had realized the existence of magic, when I had reached up into the sky in yearning.

Was it my memories of my past life that had prompted me to long for magic so badly, or was it the fact that I so desperately wanted magic that had brought back those distant memories? There was no telling which had come first.

All the same, I would continue to yearn for magic even if it was an unattainable miracle. If it existed, if it was out there, I would uncover it. I would forge a variety of magic that I could wield.

To this very day, that had been my driving urge, the momentum that propelled me forward.

"Which is why I was so scared…"

"…Lady Anis?"

"Because of those memories of my past life, I know I'm not normal. But thanks to those memories, I *need* magic. I'm obsessed with it. I can't stop. And it makes me turn a blind eye to everything else." I hung my head, wrapping my arms tightly around my body as I spat out my heavy, mud-like thoughts, the niggling suspicion that I had long been trying to ignore. "What if it's *because* of those memories that I can't use magic? If I had never remembered them, maybe I could have been a normal princess, maybe I wouldn't have had to cause everyone all this hardship…"

"What are you talking about…?" Euphie whispered.

"…Am I really Anisphia Wynn Palettia?"

This doubt had been nestled in my chest for as long as I could remember.

The world of my past life was strange and marvelous compared to the one I called home, which was why it affected me so profoundly. My disparate selves were like two pieces of a puzzle, put together into the person whom I was today.

Even if I did have memories of another life, I was still me. Despite being strongly influenced by that other self, I still

considered myself Anisphia Wynn Palettia.

But would an outsider, someone who knew the truth, think the same?

“I’m not purely me. I was born as Anisphia Wynn Palettia, but is that really who I am now? What if I ended up erasing the me who should have existed when I remembered my past life? That thought terrifies me… Did…did I rob my parents of their child?”

Euphie let out an audible gasp at this confession. But I could hold in my emotions no longer, and they came pouring out one after the next.

“I yearned for magic, but I couldn’t use it, so I wanted a substitute. Yes, I just wanted praise! I wanted to be able to do great things, even if the outcome was a little strange!”

But I was afraid. I didn’t know if I deserved to keep on living in this world that I found called home.

“Can you imagine what it would be like if you suddenly had to start living tomorrow as someone else? I have all these memories, and I know they’re mine—but I could be someone else entirely. How would my parents react if they knew that? They would probably be horrified to have such a child, right?”

That was why I had averted my gaze. I couldn’t afford to let them know what I was really thinking.

I kept telling myself that everything was fine, kept trying to dodge the crux of the issue. I let people consider me simply a peculiar princess. I decided I could live with people disliking me.

So long as they didn’t doubt me, so long as they didn’t suspect the truth and discover my true identity, everything was fine.

I did my best to wear that idealized identity that ought to exist for me like a mask, to the point that even I could recognize myself in it.

“But still, they loved me, and I didn’t want to betray them. But if people were going to consider me strange anyway, what choice did I have but to plow ahead? That’s what I thought at the time. My only weapon was the knowledge that existed inside my head. That’s why I created magicology.”

“…That’s the secret you’ve been keeping close to your chest, Lady Anis?”

“Yes. I did my best not to think about it, though, to keep it sealed up inside. I was worried that if I dwelled on it, I wouldn’t be my parent’s child anymore, that I would have robbed them of both

children. And that I could destroy the future of the entire kingdom, too. The more I thought about it, the more terrified it made me…"

Before I knew it, I was crying. I was still trying to hide my feelings, forcing myself to smile.

I wished I could have spoken about all this more calmly, but that was beyond me right then. Having realized I had to continue as a princess, I had no option but to confess this *sin*.

"It was…easy being a *peculiar* princess. So that's what I became. The stranger people considered me, the stronger I solidified my sense of self. I mixed truth and lie to fashion an identity that I could show to others. So no matter what anyone said about me, I was fine with it."

Perhaps that was the atonement I sought for having stolen the life of what might have been an ordinary princess Anisphia.

It wasn't only about my relationship with magic, though. The reason why I had pushed myself so hard—was something I couldn't even admit to myself.

I claimed to love myself for my endeavors—all the while cursing myself for who I was.

So I thought I should endure whatever I had to, no matter what anyone else said. I accepted this punishment as rightly deserved.

Meanwhile, magic remained a wonderful thing in my mind, because it was the only handhold I could rely on.

Exposing my true feelings that I had hidden among the lies was a frightening idea—but it was also a liberating one. I resolved not to hold anything back when it came to Euphie.

"The first time I really thought of it as a sin was when people starting whispering that I had tried to kill Allie."

"You mean when you and Prince Algard had your falling out…?"

"Yeah. I realized that a fake like me had no right to become the next ruler of the kingdom."

"…A fake?"

"I'm different, at a fundamental level, but I couldn't possibly make amends without being a princess inside and out, right? So I kept myself at a distance. It's my fault. Because of who I am, everything is all messed up. I decided I had to atone for it all by taking the throne myself."

Ever since my relationship with Allie had soured, I had been doing my best to maintain an idiotic smile at all times. That false

mien had soon become a mask, and before I knew it, I found myself behaving as though it was my true self.

But now that Allie was gone, my mask had begun to break apart. The prospect of having to inherit the throne one day had prompted my innermost feelings to leak through the cracks.

"Because I remembered all those things from my past life, everything started going to pieces. I still adore magic, I still love my parents, and Allie, too. But that just makes me an even bigger fake, and this sin—"

This sin can never be erased, I almost found myself saying aloud. But instead, what rang out was the sound of something hitting my cheek.

For a brief second, I couldn't understand what had just happened. I was aware simply of my cheek stinging. Then the pain hit me, and my vision seemed to shake.

I stood there stunned, trying to piece together what had occurred, when I saw that Euphie was glowering at me with her hand outstretched.

Only then did I realize she had slapped me.

"…You're such an idiot. You can be a real fool sometimes…!"

"Euphie…?"

I had never seen her so furious before. I almost felt like pulling away, but she quickly grabbed me in her arms, pushing against me.

Losing my balance, I collapsed backward onto my bed, while Euphie straddled me.

She corrected her posture, and still sitting atop me, grabbed me by the collar of my shirt. Her gaze was unmistakably sharp, her eyes flickering as though burning inside.

I could only watch on as tears began to spill down her cheeks.

"…There's no way you could be fake!"

"Huh…?"

"Everything about you is genuine! You're Anisphia Wynn Palettia!"

For a second, I couldn't quite follow that this was coming from the bottom of her heart. But the outpouring of her emotions didn't stop there.

"You're our princess, the heir of your royal blood! Even without magic, you've brought into this world feats capable of replacing magic! Even if you are an eccentric when it comes to the royal family, you've never stopped thinking about helping others! What's

that if not real?!"

"Euphie…?"

"*You* reached out to me! Not some Princess Anisphia who somehow isn't you! *You* scooped me up out of despair! It was *you*, the person right here, right now, who saved me!"

She grabbed me and shook me up and down, pulling me from the bed and pushing me back down into it. All the while, Euphie continued to cry out in a desperate appeal.

"You already have it all right here, no? Everything you've ever felt, ever wanted, ever hoped for—it's all here…!"

She let go of me and traced a finger over my heart, her tears falling drop by drop onto my body.

"Don't tell me you're a fake… I know who you are. You're the person who has always been thinking of me…"

I didn't know what to say. She continued.

"But you've been hurting inside, haven't you? All this time… I can't claim to understand that pain. But I can say this with confidence, Lady Anis."

Euphie placed a hand on my cheek and pressed her forehead up against mine. We were so close that our breath met in the space between our faces. She put her whole heart in the following words:

"As far as I'm concerned, you're the best magic wielder in the whole wide world. So please, stand proud."

…I couldn't even begin to describe my shock. I just felt as though my heart was about to break apart. Or to be more precise, the chains that had long bound my heart were disappearing.

Euphie's words melted them all away. Those shackles around my soul, to which even I had turned a blind eye… The fetters that had held so tightly that they had all but merged with my heart… It was only natural that undoing them now, after all this time, would be difficult. The tears streaked down my face.

Now I felt as though everything had been forgiven. All those things I'd been unable to forget this entire time seemed so utterly unimportant. I already had what I really wanted.

My throat twitched. I found it hard to breathe. My vision flooded with tears, and I couldn't see anything. I clung to Euphie's body. I felt like screaming, but I couldn't so much as muster my

voice.

I wanted Euphie desperately, like a lifeline. She was the only one for me, and I absolutely didn't want to let go. I needed her so painfully that I wanted to bind our souls together—but at the same time, I was overcome with a rush of joy.

"Th-thank you…!"

Thank you for saving me. Thank you for making me a magic user.

I had never wanted to be queen. All I had really wanted was to wield magic.

Like giving a pumpkin carriage to Cinderella, I wanted to bring happy smiles to so many people's faces. That was my dream. It was a dream I had thought within reach, only to be unable to grasp it.

I mean, I had always been a bad magic user, just a stone's throw away from making a mess of the kingdom and shattering people's happiness. But maybe, now that I had her in my arms, I might actually be able to become the magic wielder I always wanted to be.

Ah, it was no good. I wanted to thank her, but I could barely catch my breath. I wanted to flash her a genuine, heartfelt smile, but I was still in so much pain.

That was why I didn't realize what had suddenly prevented me from taking another breath.

It was so soft and warm, and it seeped into my lungs like a reminder to inhale.

It was Euphie's breath. Our lips were pressed up against each other, exchanging heat and air.

I was only briefly surprised before I wrapped my hands around her back, accepting this dream without resistance. Every time we touched, my sense of time seemed to melt away. My dammed-up thoughts broke free and overflowed alongside my tears.

Just how long did we remain like that? When finally Euphie let me go, I could only stare dumbly at her face, my voice ebbing out as a single syllable: "…I…"

"…Yes?"

"…Arghhhhh…! I— I'm so embarrassed…! Don't look at me…!"

My cheeks were burning. I covered my face in my hands. It was

like a fire was about to burst out from my face.

No way, did Euphie just kiss *me?!* Why had I let myself go along with it so easily?!

The wave of heat threatened to sweep me away completely as Euphie crept above me once more, her lips pressing against mine as she stole a second kiss.

"…Hee-hee," she giggled as she wiped her mouth in satisfaction.

I could only watch on in amazement, utterly captivated.

Ah, this was no good at all. She had caught me completely by surprise. I covered my face with my hands in resignation, hoping at the very least to keep her from seeing just how red they had become.

I had fallen, it seemed, head over heels in love with Euphyllia Magenta.

"Wh-why did you do that…? Y-you idiot…!"

I was already weak with love. I could no longer even look directly at that face I had always considered pretty and cute. She watched me warmly, but I couldn't even make eye contact with her.

Timidly, ever so timidly, I parted my fingers to stare back at her. Euphie flashed me a gentle smile—but for some reason, it didn't seem to reach her eyes. And as she looked down on me, a cold chill shot down my spine.

“Because I wanted to… Lady Anis, please, show me your face. I want to kiss it again.”

“Nooooo! G-get off my bed! Let go of meeeee!”

She grabbed me by the wrist, preventing me from escaping, and so I began to fight back—but she was stronger than I expected!

“B-but you should only kiss someone you love, right…?!” I protested.

“…I *do* love you,” she whispered in my ear, dealing the finishing blow.

Still, I wanted desperately to escape. It wouldn’t do to let myself succumb to the moment…!

“Y-you’re talking about respect or friendship, right?! You have to be!”

“If it’s what you want, I’ll give you my loyalty and friendship. But I’m offering you my most heartfelt affection, so please, if you can, I ask that you accept it.”

The voice sounding in my ear seemed to lose strength, and I used that chance to break free from her grip and swing around to face her. Up close, I could see that her eyes were glistening, and that sight made my heart pound even louder than before.

“You’re capricious, selfish, and afraid to accept my feelings even though you want to. But we can’t keep bottling them up, Lady Anis.”

She had seen through to my innermost heart—but before I could answer her, she stole the words from my lips.

Her third kiss was so intense that I completely lost my train of thought. And I couldn’t help but feel as though it wasn’t just my lips that she had stolen.

“Euphie… Wait…!”

“…No.”

I tried to raise my voice in protest as her sweet lips nibbled on mine, but at that moment, I sensed her taking something else from me.

By the time I recognized it as magical energy, I was helpless to resist as her kiss drained me of my strength.

“Gah! Eu-Euphie…!” I managed to cry out in between breaths. “H-hold up a second… Nghhhhh?!”

Again and again, I called out for her to stop, but she continued

to ignore me, sucking my lips and tongue into a passionate kiss.

My brain was melting away in the sweet numbness, and I found myself clinging to her, unable to think of anything else.

I was being dragged away as she drained my magical energy, feeling as though the carpet had been pulled out from under me. My surroundings began to fade into darkness.

"…Huh? Lady Anis? Lady Anis?! Lady Anis, stay with me!"

"Ugh…"

I could hear Euphie calling out in panic as my consciousness deserted me.

For Free Tokidoki

"…So you've finally crossed the line, huh?"

"No! Nothing happened! Nothing!"

"I hope you realize your protests aren't doing much to persuade me."

I woke in the morning so tired that I could barely move, when Tilty, having come to the detached palace for my checkup, found me lying in bed beside Euphie.

"…Forgive me, Lady Anis," Euphie said, her shoulders drooping.

Apparently, she had lost control last night, draining my magical energy until I had lost consciousness. It had left her terribly flustered.

She said she had breathed a sigh of relief to see that I was just sleeping, so she had dozed off lightly for a while. She hadn't gotten up until Tilty found us. Ilia could have at least tried to rouse us first!

"Hmm… It looks like you didn't use your Impressed Seal for as long as last time, so the side effects aren't so bad. But I would say the drain to your magical energy reserves looks much more serious, you know?"

Tilty took my arm and placed a hand on my chest as she examined me. My fight with Allie had left me practically unable to move. This time hadn't been so severe.

"Draining your magical energy might have actually helped to offset any adverse effects, but I'll have to look you over further to make sure. But more importantly for now, did something happen to Euphyllia?"

"Me…? In what way?" the person in question echoed.

"How did you drain Anis's magical energy to the point of losing consciousness?"

"Huh? Ah, yes, I did that, didn't I? But how exactly…?"

Lainie similarly tilted her head to one side as she watched on. Transferring magical energy was no easy feat. No matter how proficient one was, the process risked causing symptoms not at all dissimilar to intoxication, so it shouldn't have been possible to

absorb too much all at once.

And yet Euphie had drained my energy so completely that I had been knocked out cold. That certainly wasn't normal, by any means.

"…That's because she has transformed."

All at once, a voice that wasn't supposed to be present resounded throughout the room, prompting us to spin toward it in surprise.

It was Lumielle. A cold sweat began to seep into my skin at her arrival. Her presence seemed completely natural, but I had no idea when she had entered.

"Anis, is this that covenantor?" Tilty asked.

"Tilty, be polite…," I said with a nod, perplexed by her overly brusque attitude.

"…She *does* look a lot like you, don't you think?" Tilty observed.

"Huh? How? You mean the color of her hair, right?"

"Her overall demeanor is pretty similar, too, though, no? She's like a more twisted, more convoluted version of you."

"You're right, my dear. I won't deny that people once labeled me a witch," Lumielle remarked.

"…A witch, huh?" Tilty said, glaring at her in suspicion.

The person in question, however, seemed not to mind, her gaze clear and calm.

"Lumielle? What do you mean, Euphie has *transformed*…? Are you saying what I think you are…?"

"Yes. Perhaps congratulations are in order, my new compatriot?"

In other words, Euphie had successfully fulfilled her spirit covenant. I glanced toward her, wondering what to make of this, and she, too, met my gaze.

"You don't *look* any different, though."

"Not outwardly, she doesn't. Euphyllia, you've always been reluctant to acknowledge your desires, I take it? That is a common trait among spirit covenantors."

"Reluctant to accept desires?"

"To a spirit, the human body is no more than a vessel. If you aren't conscious of your needs, if you don't eat, drink, or sleep…the vessel will die."

Lumielle's explanation sent a shiver coursing down my spine. I had always thought of Euphie as being at least somewhat

withdrawn, but might that tendency of hers get worse now?

"Well, there are always exceptions, so she might be fine," Lumielle added.

"Exceptions?"

"Just as a human needs to satisfy their thirst and hunger in order to survive, so must a spirit covenantor."

"…By consuming magical energy, you mean?" Tilty asked.

Lumielle responded with a nod.

So that was why Euphie had drained my magical energy last night…?

"Of course, only certain people are compatible…but if that has been enough to fulfill her, I think it's safe to say that you two were meant to be together. You do make a charming pair."

"Ugh, h-huh…?! Wh-wh-wh-wh-what are you saying?!"

I could feel my face growing hot, my cheeks turning bright red. Seeing my reaction, Ilia shrugged as though putting me down as a lost cause, Lainie flashed me a forced smile, while Tilty stared down at me dully. Euphie seemed a little embarrassed, but she was still smiling with contentment.

That smile of hers was grating on my nerves, so I pulled at her cheeks as hard as I could.

"Well, I'm sure you'll both be fine. So long as you have each other, you shouldn't repeat our failures."

"…Lumielle?"

"This kingdom no longer needs the absolute authority of magic. As you said, it's a new era. So long as she has you, Anisphia, she should be fine. Just don't do anything too crazy. And so long as you have her, you should be fine as well. You can support each other, and that's what's most important in a good match."

"…I'm not all that great, though," I demurred.

"I wouldn't say that. Travelers like yourself have all the qualities of real-life heroes. Those whose souls are imbued with spirits tend to accept the world as it is, no matter how much it has succumbed to misrule. But travelers are different. They find their inspiration within themselves—and because of that, they can maintain their beliefs without wavering. And so from time to time, travelers have brought about profound change."

Lumielle stared at me, her gaze filled with affection. For some reason, I was caught by the impression that she wasn't looking at *me*, exactly, but *through* me to someone else.

Realizing what that look signified, I asked her, “Was the other traveler you knew…important to you, Lumielle?”

She froze for a second at this question. After a moment, she shook her shoulders and began to laugh. She wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes. “Yes. Like me, he was one of your ancestors.”

“Ancestors… Hold on; you mean…?”

For that to be possible, Lumielle must have given birth to the ancestors of the royal family. In other words, she was talking about a companion. I understood fully that she was a spirit covenantor and therefore immortal, but in appearance, she still looked like a young woman the same age as me. It was difficult to truly believe.

I peered at her closely. She was still smiling, but that expression was a little different from before. Perhaps it was nostalgia.

“He was a good person. Wonderful. What I would have given for us to live by each other’s side forever. But the spans of our lives were hopelessly at odds. Nothing good would have happened had I remained in the kingdom, and I was heartbroken when I had to say good-bye… But I’m glad we met, truly.”

“…Lumielle.”

“I gave him a chance, and I supported him. The kingdom exists today not because of me, but thanks to him. Even if only you here know the truth…please remember that.”

I nodded in understanding. Euphie and the others all wore the same mystified look.

It was a spirit covenantor who had founded the realm, but it was a traveler incapable of using magic who had solidified its foundations. It was almost ironic.

“Travelers…really are the rarest of people, aren’t they? It’s hard to tell if they’re good or bad…”

“The correct answer is both, I’m sure. Although Anisphia here seems to be a different breed of traveler from those I’ve met before. Different from my companion, too.”

“…Really?”

“Yes. It’s like you see something the rest of us can’t… At least that’s how it seems to me.”

I caught my breath, shrinking back in alarm. Euphie’s face similarly paled in caution. Could Lumielle have suspected that I possessed memories of a past life? We had only just met, but it was clear that I couldn’t afford to let down my guard around her.

“Now that a new spirit covenantor has been born, I suppose it can’t be helped. I’ll have to stay here in the royal capital for a time to keep an eye on you. I’m curious to see where you all are headed. Good luck, my dear descendants.”

With those words, a whirlwind swept into the room. I closed my eyes instinctively, and by the time I opened them, Lumielle had disappeared without a trace.

“…What on earth was that?” Tilty exclaimed, rubbing her arms warily. “I thought she was joking about being a witch. I’ve never been so frightened.”

Ilia and Lainie likewise looked a little pale.

Now that Lumielle had come out with such an impressive declaration, we had no choice but to recognize that Euphie was now a spirit covenantor herself.

“…Now that she’s entered into the covenant, does this mean Lady Euphyllia will be adopted into the royal family?” Lainie asked in an attempt to liven the mood.

“That would depend on His Majesty… But even if he’s reluctant at first, I intend to bring him around.”

“Euphie…”

To be honest, I still felt conflicted about all this. Could I really step aside and leave such a heavy responsibility for her to shoulder?

At that moment, Tilty placed a hand on my head. “Don’t waver,” she said.

“Huh…?”

“It’s all good. If Euphyllia takes the throne, you’ll be free, Anis. You’re much better off that way.”

“…I wonder…”

“It’s not like you’ll have nothing to do if you step down. You’ll be busy either way. Besides, from what I hear, Euphyllia wants to help you achieve your dreams, right? Whether or not you become queen, you still need to keep pushing on with your magicology.”

Euphie’s goal was to help me to make my dreams come true, which would also revolutionize a kingdom that had grown misshapen from its ancient traditions. As Tilty said, my magicology would be essential to achieve that goal.

“A spirit covenantor, closer than anyone to the historical royal family, has chosen you over the traditions of the past. So hold your head up high, Anis. You’re going to forge a new era, right? The only difference now is that instead of doing it all alone, you’re going to

do it together with her."

"With Euphie…?"

"…Well, I'll lend you a hand for a while, too. And don't forget, you have Ilia and Lainie to help out as well. You kept insisting that you were the only one capable of leading the country, so I held my tongue, but if there's another candidate, you should just leave it all to them. You're not really meant for the throne, Anis."

"So even Tilty thinks I'm not cut out for it…"

"You're ill-suited to it, not incapable of it. If push comes to shove, you can do it, sure, but can you do it well? What makes you think you can hold your own playing politics when you can't even abandon a lost cause like me?" Tilty teased, gently ruffling my hair.

Under normal circumstances, she would never allow herself to act this friendly, I thought with pleasure.

At that moment, my skin erupted with goose bumps. Feeling someone's gaze lingering on me, I glanced around, only to find Euphie watching on expressionlessly.

With a jolt, Tilty pulled away. "Hey, there's no need to be jealous, Euphyllia… Are you *certain* nothing happened between you both?"

"Nothing happened! It was all aboveboard!" I shouted.

"I'm sure it was…"

I was at a loss for words, unable to argue, and could let out only a pained groan. As she glared at Tilty, Euphie approached my side and grasped my hand.

I had no idea what to do with Euphie, who was radiating displeasure despite her guarded expression, and so I turned to Ilia and Lainie for help.

"Ah, I should prepare some tea."

"I'll accompany you, Lainie."

"Well, that's it for my examination, so I wouldn't mind a cup of tea before heading home."

"H-hold on! You three!"

As soon as I turned my attention to them, all three left the room as of one mind.

Tilty was the last to step through the door, turning to me as she left. "Anyway, you should get some rest. Take care of Anis, Euphyllia."

"Thank you again, Tilty."

The door slammed shut. After being swept along in that flow of

events, I was then swept into Euphie's arms.

"Eu-Euphie… Th-that's a little close, isn't it…?"

"Is it? I thought Tilty stayed around this close while she was examining you, though."

"It's different! Our hearts weren't anywhere near this close!"

"Is that so?"

"Why do you look so happy?!"

Euphie, linking her arm through mine, flashed me a look of relief and put me to bed. All the while, she held a hand up against my cheek—which left me only more flustered.

It came as a relief when Lainie and Ilia returned to bring us both some tea, but I could only stare after them with resentment for having taken an unusually long amount of time.

* * *

It was nightfall by the time my father arrived at the detached palace along with my mother and Duke Grantz. After the three of them had gathered in the drawing room, my father addressed Euphie. "I'm willing to adopt Euphyllia as my heir, but the timing is critical. We will need to wait for the right moment."

"The timing…?"

"Yes. If the announcement seems to be due only to your fulfillment of your spirit covenant, people will pay attention only to your achievements. But that isn't what you want, I take it?"

"…No. I want to rule as an intermediary and help build a new era."

"Hmm. Yes, we all share that goal. Which is why I believe it is still too early to formally adopt you as heir to the throne," my father said gravely.

To be honest, I agreed. Even if Euphie were to be adopted now on the grounds of her spirit covenant, in the public's eye, she would only be a repeat of the kingdom's first ruler. That wouldn't help her achieve her real goals. Ultimately, what we needed was to shake free from the excesses of the kingdom's spiritualist beliefs.

By mass-producing magical tools, the commoners would be able to stop relying on the nobility, and the difference in status between the two social classes would fade away.

The common people would gain their independence, able to

protect their lives and their livelihoods on their own.

However, if that happened, the authority of the aristocracy would diminish in turn. That may have been one of our objectives, but if change was too forceful or too fast, the nobility could rise up in rebellion, tearing the country in two. Should that happen, everything would have been in vain.

"I thought Euphie's accomplishment in fulfilling her covenant would serve as sufficient cause to cede the throne to the Magentas… But ultimately, it doesn't make sense to focus only on her covenant," my father observed. "Moreover, I daresay the Ministry of the Arcane and other noble families rooted in their faith won't let the Magentas rise up too quickly without making their voices heard."

"For that reason, Anis, we'll be relying on your achievements, too," my mother added. "Regardless of which of you succeeds to the throne, we will need to ensure the fruits of your magicology are recognized throughout the realm."

"Anis, assuming you did become queen, how did you intend to deal with the nobility?" my father asked.

"What would I do with them…?" I repeated. "Why would you ask that…?"

"Not even you would have been willing to take on the responsibility of ruling without thinking that far ahead. So if you had become queen, what kind of realm would you have built? I want to hear it directly from you."

What kind of realm would I have built? My father and the others knew that I wanted to encourage the common folk to become independent from the nobility by providing them with magical tools.

So were they asking how I would approach the aristocracy? It certainly sounded like it. And it wasn't like I *hadn't* given it any thought.

"Nothing special. I suppose I would have expanded their freedoms, too."

"…Their freedoms?"

"I want to tell them that they don't have to be bound by stereotypes or tradition, that they shouldn't have to focus only on improving their magical skills simply because of their social status at birth. After all, what I want is for *everyone* to be free."

Tilty was a good example. There were plenty of people born to

noble families yet unable to fully wield magic themselves.

Allie came to mind as well. My younger brother had been born the son of the king but had lived his life always being told that his talents were mediocre at best. He, too, had been a prisoner of his birth.

"I want to make this kingdom a place where everyone, nobles and common folk alike, can live the way they want, without being limited by their social status. Nobles shouldn't have to focus exclusively on polishing their magical abilities but should be able to devote themselves to the study of magic or spirits, too, for example. If the common folk were properly educated, they would be able to run estates themselves instead of that duty always falling on nobles. I don't want to live in a world where social status determines who you have to be all your life. I want to change that for everyone."

That was why I had decided on freedom. I wanted the kingdom to be a place where everyone could be free, even if that meant destroying the values and customs bound to the myriad traditions we had inherited.

I wanted to give people all the options they needed to secure for themselves a happy future.

As I spoke, my mother stared at me, her eyes unusually wide.

"Er, i-is something the matter, Mother…?" I asked.

"…You really are your father's daughter, Anis. You're just like him."

This sudden declaration prompted my father to let out an audible *harrumph*. "What are you saying, Sylphine? In what way?"

At that moment, support arrived from an unexpected quarter. "No, she's right, Orphans. There can be no doubt that Princess Anisphia is your daughter."

"You too, Grantz?! You can't possibly be comparing me to this fool girl!"

"Horticulture and gardening."

"Ngh!"

"Cultivating new crops."

"Nghhhhh…"

"…If you hadn't become king, you would have probably turned out just like Anis," my mother whispered with affection.

With this, my father abandoned his protests. Perhaps having realized that the odds were against him, he cleared his throat and changed the subject. "…Ahem. Anis. You don't bear any grudges

against the nobles who mistreated you?"

"If you're asking whether I resent them, I suppose I do. And if you want to know if I've forgiven them, the answer is probably *no*. But we all live in the same country. I'm not about to go out seeking revenge or to bring them down. I don't have time for it."

"…I see. So you want to grant this kingdom freedom? You want to build an era of freedom…?"

"…Father?"

"I, too, would like to see such a country for myself. You have my backing, Anis. Proceed however you think best and make your ideals a reality."

My father's expression as he said this was more peaceful than I had ever before seen. I understood, intuitively, that this was his true face—and with that realization, I knew also that he'd always needed to exercise considerable self-restraint as king.

His expression and words left a deep impression on my heart. Closing my eyes, I held them close to my chest. "Yes. I'll do my best…Father," I responded gently.

My father appeared to be at peace as he nodded. "…Then, do you have any ideas, Anis?"

"Any ideas? Hmm…"

At that moment, as I ruminated over how to proceed, Euphie spoke up. "…In that case, *I* have a suggestion."

"Euphie?"

Her proposal left each of us gathered in the room utterly astonished.

* * *

"…Huh? You want *me* to help you?"

"Please, Tomas! I need you! Won't you lend me a hand?"

"…Hold on. Don't bow your head like that. Ah, you can be a real pain, you know? I wish I could pretend I hadn't heard you."

"No! Argh! Hey, don't turn your back on me! I have official authorization from my father! This is a royal order!"

Euphie and I had come to Tomas's Gana Armory to negotiate business with him, but he didn't seem particularly keen on the idea.

Even so, invoking my father's authority was enough to convince him to turn around.

"…What do you want me to do, then?" he asked, resigning himself to hear me out.

"Tomas, I want to hear your opinion on something."

"My opinion?"

"Take a look at this," Euphie said, passing him a sheet of paper.

As he looked it over, Tomas's eyebrows rose in surprise. "… What the heck is this? Some new magical tool?"

"It's called an Airdra," Euphie answered. "You could call it a more advanced version of Lady Anis's Witch's Broom."

"How does a broom turn into something like *this*? It looks like some kind of weird little boat…"

"…Ahem. Tomas," I continued, "I'd like you to introduce us to some craftsmen who can assemble the Airdra. It'd be great if you could also act as an intermediary on my behalf."

"Hey, hey, come on. Why would you want to give *me* a highfalutin job like that?" he asked uneasily.

As though the response was obvious, Euphie replied, "Because as a craftsman, you've been working with Lady Anis for a long time now. I'm sure you can best grasp what she wants and offer helpful advice, no?"

"…Ah, well. I guess so."

"We aren't particularly familiar with the castle town and its artisans and craftsmen, so we would like to appoint you as our intermediary."

"…In that case, why don't you take this thing to one of the major workshops, then?"

"Do you think your skill and expertise is inferior to the major workshops? I didn't realize that the size of a workshop was a fair indicator of the quality of its craftsmen," Euphie remarked.

Tomas's lips pressed together, and his cheeks twitched in silent offense.

"Euphie, don't provoke him," I said. "Tomas, I know I can trust you. You're my first choice. And I have another request as well…"

"Huh? You mean besides this Airdra thing?"

"Here…," I murmured, passing him an additional sheet of paper.

Tomas took it in his hands, frowning as he looked it over as though laying eyes on something peculiar. "…Oh? Another magical tool, I take it…?"

"…In a manner of speaking."

"…Nah. There's no way I can do something like that here."

"That's exactly the point. This time, I need a team of craftsmen from a wide range of backgrounds, as well as someone who can get them all to work together. That's why I need you to oversee it and find the best people. With all the conflicting interests, I don't think any of the major workshops would be able to handle this…"

"…No, probably not. So you want me to handle this and your Airdra together? I think I understand what you need. But is it really necessary to go in for something this dramatic?"

"…Please keep this between us, Tomas," Euphie said. "The royal family is in talks to adopt me."

"…Huh?"

"So we need achievements of great merit to show for it," she continued.

"No, no… Achievements? What are you going on about…? No, I don't wanna hear it. I don't need the details. But if you want to distinguish yourself, the Airdra ought to be enough, right…? Ah, unless *that's* what you mean…?" Tomas glanced down at the sheet of paper once more, then fell silent. After a short pause, he raised his face and addressed Euphie, "…Honestly, I think the Airdra alone would probably be enough. But you disagree, which is what this is for, right, Lady Euphie?"

"Yes. I'm glad you understand. If this plan goes well, it will open new prospects to the craftsmen who had been involved in the project. I will make it clear that Lady Anis and I are backing you the whole time. What do you think, Tomas? Will you do it?"

"…Does it *have* to be me?"

"Then let me rephrase the invitation. Tomas. Don't you want to prove your worth as a craftsman? To show that you're not just someone else's ward?"

At this, Tomas crossed his arms and stared at the ceiling. He held the position for a long moment, before raising his hands in surrender. "All right, I give up. I'll do it. I'll reach out to a few artisans I'll need to make these things. But call it a royal order all you want, I'm treating this as a job. You *are* going to pay me for my services, right?"

"Of course."

"All right. I'll do everything I can… Geez, it's always a handful when Lady Anis is involved, huh?"

Watching him cross his arms, his expression one of scandalized

bewilderment, I couldn't help but break out in a smile. This was always his reaction whenever I came to him with a request. But all the same, his lips were curled into a slight smile. My personal request would inevitably require the expertise of a craftsman, and it would be a good opportunity to help that artisan increase his own renown.

Now that Tomas had accepted our requests, Euphie prepared to leave the Gana Armory. I moved to follow her outside but stopped at the entrance, glancing around once more. "Um, Tomas. Can I ask you one more favor?"

"Huh? What now?"

"Well… You see…"

And so I told him about my wish—and as I did so, his eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"…Are you sure? And after you kept on coming up with one reason or another to refuse?"

"No. It's a good opportunity."

"…Right. I don't know what convinced you to change your mind, but I'll take you up on it."

"Thank you, Tomas."

After listening to my request, Tomas was glad to accept it. As I thanked him, his eyes filled me with the warmth of knowing I had someone watching over me.

CHAPTER II

The Kingdom of Palettia was graced with an almost constantly pleasant climate, the only exception being the rainy season. For those nobles who maintained residences in the royal capital, this quarter of the year was widely understood as a time to return to their ancestral homes.

Those nobles in important positions may have belied this trend, but during these three long months, most members of the aristocracy tended to return to their estates to rest in their mansions and be ready to respond without delay should disaster strike.

With the hustle and bustle of the castle town having died down, the craftsmen, too, would be hard at work training their apprentices as they aimed to complete their projects before the rains let up. And so, toward the end of the rainy season, Tomas paid a visit to the detached palace.

"Er… I— I'm honored t-to be invited here today… I guess…?"

"This is a private residence, Tomas. There's no need to stand on ceremony," I told him.

He was dressed in formal attire, and there could be no denying that he was properly dressed for the occasion. Nonetheless, my comment was enough to shatter the carefully groomed appearance he was striving to maintain.

"…Ugh, I'm not used to this… Count me out. I'm never doing this again."

"Really?"

"Cut me some slack, already… I've delivered what you wanted. There were no issues during the low-flying test for the Airdra. I'm guessing I can leave the rest of the evaluation tests to you, Lady Anis?"

"Yes. I'll drop by later to thank everyone who helped build it."

"Do that. It was a big job, and they all put in a lot of work."

Tomas turned his gaze toward an object that resembled something called a motorcycle in my past life—the Airdra. A new magical tool for powered flight, forged by the craftsmen of the castle town in line with my blueprints. It was the finest magical tool I had ever designed, crafted using the materials I had retrieved from

the dragon.

“Was the other item delivered earlier? Were there any issues?” Tomas asked.

“No. I’ve already finished looking it over with Euphie.”

“No problems, then? That’s a relief… Seriously, it wasn’t an easy job, but I guess it was worthwhile. Still, this is why your projects are such a pain in the ass.”

“You say that, but you don’t look altogether unhappy, Tomas.”

“…Tch. Gloating doesn’t suit you. Still, if this goes well, maybe we’ll be able to mass-produce more magical tools.”

“That’s my goal. We’ll do our best to make sure it works.”

Euphie, having finished confirming the delivery of the Airdra, came our way. “I’m not worried about that, Lady Anis. Thank you for all your hard work, Tomas,” she said. “I’ve confirmed receipt of the items, the Airdra included.”

“I hope you’re happy with it.”

“Yes, very. I’d like to reward you and your craftsmen for all their efforts.”

“Oh, by the way, I heard Lady Anis will be making a public announcement about her research results soon,” Tomas said. “What’s that about?”

“We want to attract considerable attention,” Euphie answered. “Most nobles who went back to their fiefs for the rainy season should be returning to the royal capital soon, and we’re expecting lots of other visitors, too. We’re going to make the most of that opportunity.”

“I see… Well, good luck. I’m looking forward to it as well.”

Euphie, her lips curled in a gentle smile, nodded.

Throughout the rainy season, we had been preparing with the help of a great many individuals, Tilty included, while also engaging in the necessary social activities.

The presentation would be to demonstrate the results of my research to produce flying magical tools, and it had received official approval from my father. Ostensibly, the aim was to help improve my reputation among the upper classes.

Our real goal, however, was something else—but I wasn’t yet sure how it would all turn out. Still, I had done everything I could, so the only thing left was to face the day as it came.

“…Lady Anis. I have one last delivery, then.”

“Huh? Was there something else?” Euphie asked, tilting her

head to one side with curiosity.

I was wondering what exactly he meant, myself, but as he pulled a box from his bag, I understood.

Inside that box was a sword. My first impression…was that the blade was remarkably short. It was really more of a dagger.

Nonetheless, it had a long hilt—longer even than the blade itself—and it was intricately crafted.

"…What's this, Lady Anis?" Euphie asked.

"I asked Tomas to make it for me. I wanted a magical blade of my own, similar to your Arc-en-Ciel."

When I had designed my Mana Blades, Tomas had pointed out on several occasions that the design would work better with a blade installed, that it would make the overall design more stable.

I had stubbornly refused to follow his advice, for the entirely emotional reason that a physical blade wasn't magic. Of course, storing them in pockets was also one of my goals, but the main reason why the Mana Blades were simply hilts when deactivated was ultimately just a childish one.

But now that Euphie had acknowledged my worth as a practitioner of magic, I no longer had any reservations.

"The Mana Blades were quickly overcome by the dragon's magic. So I asked Tomas to forge me a magical sword stronger than a regular Mana Blade…"

"I applied what I learned making Lady Euphie's Arc-en-Ciel and incorporated as much spirit stone as I could into the blade," Tomas explained. "Thanks to that, it's a bit thicker, so it shouldn't break as easily now. Like with the Arc-en-Ciel, the blade works as a conductor for magical energy, so it should be capable of channeling more power than a regular Mana Blade."

"…But this is more like a billhook than a sword, no?" I said as I removed the weapon from its scabbard.

The blade of the daggerlike weapon was thick and single-edged, and it carried an unmistakable heft. I could see my own face in the polished blade, and I adjusted the weapon in my hand. Grasping it for myself, I could understand why Tomas had designed it this way. Its long handle allowed the wielder to hold it either with one hand or both. Only the length of the blade seemed disproportionate.

"No, it's only modeled on a magical sword. The point of the blade is just so it can function as a Mana Blade. It's definitely not a real sword. I designed the hilt based on my own calculations, but I

can adjust it if you want. Let me know what you think after you've had a chance to try it out."

"…Can I activate it?"

"Sure, let me see. I tried it myself…but it was a bit like trying to ride an untamed horse."

Nodding along, I stepped away from Tomas and Euphie and held the weapon in my hands. Exhaling slowly, I focused my awareness and channeled my magical energy into the sword.

It was deep. That was the first thing I felt. The blade was certainly wielding my magical energy well, which must have been what granted it that sense of depth. I couldn't even guess just how much magic it was capable of handling.

I continued to pour more energy into it, much more than when I used a regular Mana Blade. I could see what Tomas had meant when he had described it as an untamed horse. There could be no comparing this to a regular Mana Blade.

Once the amount of energy poured into it reached a limit, a magical blade extended from the hilt—a single-edged blade of light firmly balanced against the grip.

"It looks like you've imagined the blade as an extension of the one built into the hilt. If you want to make it double-edged, you'll need to change the way you channel your energy into the spirit stones embedded into the hilt near your hand. After all, you have a large reserve of magical energy, Lady Anis, so I thought that would make for a good alteration… But if you don't like it…"

"If you were going to mass-produce them, it would probably be best to lower the costs a little. But as a one-off…I couldn't have asked for more."

First of all, I liked its apparent durability. I could feel its strength, and I was confident that it wouldn't break even if I poured not only my own energy into it, but that of my Impressed Seal forged from dragon materials, too.

"It looks like it should also be fine for self-defense when I'm not channeling magic through it," I observed. "Basically, it's easy to pull out and hold at the ready. And I do focus more on defense than offense."

"That's right," Tomas replied. "You have magic of your own, don't you, Lady Anis? In that case, you can protect yourself with tools like this. That sword will never break. So long as you don't let go of it, it will help you."

I looked back up at him as he suggested this.

Tomas in turn watched me with a dauntless grin. “I thought it would make a good shield for you, to help you ward off attacks when your own magic runs out. I’m giving you my magnum opus, Lady Anis.”

“…So I have magic, too…? You’re all killing me with compliments lately, huh?”

The corners of my eyes grew warm with joy. There could be no doubt about it—this sword was most certainly intended for me. A protective weapon that had overcome the shortcomings of regular Mana Blades and could be used as a magical sword.

It had been brought into being only for me, and it couldn’t have been forged with normal ideas. And it was unbreakable, which meant I could continue to use magic. So long as my magical energy wasn’t depleted, or my will.

I could think of it only as a prayer directed specifically to me.

“…Tomas. Have you given the sword a name?”

“Mmm… I’m not educated enough for that. If you like it, Lady Anis, why don’t you give it one?”

Well, that certainly wouldn’t be an easy task. A name, a name…?

As I tilted my head to one side, ruminating over the possibilities, Euphie, until now watching on from the sidelines, spoke up: “What about Celestial?”

“Celestial?”

“I think it means *sky*. My Arc-en-Ciel is named after a rainbow, so wouldn’t that be a good choice for its sister blade?”

“Rainbow and sky? I suppose it does fit.”

“I think it’s perfect for the first person in this whole world who ever imagined themselves soaring *through* the sky.”

…Sky. Right, I had always found my beginnings in the sky.

That day, when I had looked up at the firmament above, I had become *me*. Everything had started that day—this life, my prayers, my hopes, and of course, those things that only I could bring to this world.

“…This is all too much.”

Tears had spilled from my eyes. Lately, it seemed that so many things were prompting me to cry my heart out. But I didn’t want to hold them back, I didn’t want to stop crying—because in my mind, these tears were the best way to express my admiration for Tomas’s

handiwork.

"I'm so happy I met you, Tomas."

Releasing the magical energy I had channeled inside it, I returned the newly baptized blade, Celestial, to its sheath. Then I held out my hand.

Tomas, a little confused, took it in his own rugged hand and gave it a clumsy shake. I was in love with what he had created for me. Infinitely proud, as well.

"I'll never forget how lucky I am to have met you. Your background doesn't matter, royal or common—you're the best blacksmith I know. I'd really like to grant you an honor…"

"…No, really. There's no need for that," Tomas said, looking back at me with the gentlest smile I had ever seen. "Your tears are worth more than any jewel… They're enough for me."

"…It's a little late to try to woo me…"

"Who said anything about wooing you?"

Yes, this was enough for both of us. So my next words I said only in my mind, over and over: *You're an irreplaceable friend, Tomas. I can never thank you enough.*

* * *

That day, it felt like her dreams took flight.

No sooner had the rainy season passed than King Orphans issued a public announcement that Princess Anisphia would soon be presenting the results of her magicology research—the new aerial magical tool she had introduced to the Ministry of the Arcane several months earlier.

Many in the kingdom had already witnessed the princess take to the sky with this mysterious device. What was more, it was said to have been forged from dragon materials, which in the minds of many an onlooker was nothing short of amazing.

A certain noblewoman thought these announcements were probably in anticipation of a public proclamation that Princess Anisphia would one day succeed to the throne—and considering all the hardships the princess would soon have to face, this young noblewoman wanted to support her.

Her family was the holder of a baronetcy, one of the lowest ranks of the nobility, and she herself wasn't possessed of any

remarkable talents. Indeed, this young noblewoman was regarded by many as a straggler, a failure even.

Princess Anisphia had suffered greater disadvantage than she had. Yet while this young noblewoman's struggles often pushed her to the verge of tears, the royal princess, whose situation should have been so much worse, seemed to have a smile for everyone and was always happily inventing strange new tools.

In truth, this young noblewoman was a secret admirer of the princess. To her, Anisphia was eminently worthy of respect, living each day filled with positivity, continuing to produce new achievements in spite of the hardships that stood in her way.

Her most recent invention was no less incredible.

Riding atop that unfamiliar vehicle, an Airdra, was the leader of the royal guard, Commander Sprout. As a proficient user of wind magic and a capable knight, he had been selected to drive the strange invention just in case things went awry.

Anisphia, along with her assistant Lady Euphyllia Magenta, began to introduce the new magical tool. A great many people, intrigued by the potential benefits that could be brought by these flying vehicles, followed carefully and listened on with great interest.

On the other hand, those associated with the Ministry of the Arcane wore less than favorable expressions. As far as the young noblewoman was concerned, their dislike for the princess was simply bitterness that it was she who had accomplished such a remarkable feat.

The noblewoman's family belonged to a faction with ardent spiritualist beliefs, and as a result, she had never had the opportunity to interact with the princess on a personal level. In truth, she would have loved nothing more than to study under Anisphia's tutelage, but the knowledge of just how difficult that would be only served to depress her.

As these myriad thoughts swirled through the young noblewoman's head, the Airdra, controlled by Commander Sprout, let out a cry like a dragon's roar. With that, a great wind rose up around it, and it soared high into the sky, a scream-like cheer erupting from the massed onlookers.

"It's flying! Others can do it, too, not just Princess Anisphia!" sounded a voice, followed by a buzz of agreement.

It was true—the young noblewoman had witnessed the princess

flying atop her broom-like magical tool, but she had never considered that she might one day be able to travel the sky as well.

However, the one controlling the Airdra now was Commander Sprout. His posture seemed similar to how one might ride a horse, so it was easy to for the noblewoman to imagine herself in his position.

“If only I had one of those,” the people were murmuring around it.

Before she knew it, the commander had shrunken to the size of a small dot, before turning around in midair and returning to the castle town.

Cheers rang out once more as the commander landed the Airdra. Stepping down from the magical tool, he offered the crowd a light wave.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your encouragement,” called Euphyllia Magenta, calming the cries of surprise, joy, and anticipation.

To the young noblewoman, hers was a familiar face, as they had been in the same grade at the Aristocratic Academy.

At Anisphia’s side, Euphyllia, standing up straight, didn’t seem to have changed at all since the noblewoman had last spotted her from a distance.

“I hope you all understand that the Airdra is different from previous aerial magical tools. However, there are still issues that need to be addressed, not least what to do in the event of an emergency should it stop functioning in midair.”

The crowd’s enthusiasm dampened somewhat with these words. Certainly, if someone were to fall from a height like that, their life would undoubtedly be in serious jeopardy.

That must have been why Commander Sprout, an expert at wielding wind magic, had been selected to demonstrate it. But in that case, people began to whisper among themselves, could it only safely be used by those proficient with wind magic?

“As such, we’ve prepared another flying tool as well. Allow me to introduce it,” Anisphia declared on Euphyllia’s behalf.

The crowd let out exclamations of startlement. Wasn’t the Airdra supposed to be the main attraction?

“If you attended my presentation to the Ministry of the Arcane, you’ll know that I developed flight magic with the help of my assistant, Euphyllia Magenta. However, even with her talent, that

magic is difficult to control. And so we've invented a special outfit to help."

The audience's gaze turned to the dresses that adorned the bodies of both ladies.

The young noblewoman had assumed that the two ladies were wearing special dresses for the presentation, and so she was naturally surprised to learn that Anisphia's clothes were themselves a magical tool. The audience as a whole viewed her with equal skepticism.

At first glance, it looked like an ordinary dress. If there was any one feature that stood out, it would have to be the magnificent jewels and embroidery that seemed to cover its every surface.

Anisphia's garments appeared to be modeled on a bird spreading its wings, its white base decorated with fluffy pink accents complementing her appearance remarkably well.

It would be revealed later that the outfit was a joint work by a team of craftsmen, led by a man called Tomas, a close friend of the princess.

In some ways, it was like a more luxurious version of the clothes that Anisphia usually wore, fashioned after a knight's uniform. Atop the dress, she wore a coat tailored with the same design.

Euphyllia's outfit, too, seemed to have been custom-made to match Anisphia's. Hers was likewise modeled after a knight's uniform but was blue in color and covered in bright embroidery that reminded one of a butterfly's wings.

If Anisphia's dress was vivacious and cheerful, Euphyllia's was graceful, adorning her with a sense of heightened nobility.

Her coat was also different in design in many details, her overall appearance seeming more mature and composed.

But even being told that both dresses were themselves magical tools, the audience couldn't quite fathom what that truly meant.

"Now then, together with Euphyllia Magenta, I will perform an aerial flight maneuver, a midair waltz. I hope you'll be able to witness the results of our efforts for yourselves!"

Yes, that day, it felt like her dreams took flight.

As the young noblewoman gazed toward Anisphia and

Euphyllia, she knew at once that she would never forget the scene that began to play out before her.

* * *

It seems to be channeling magical energy well. No problem with its circuitry…

I took a slow, deep breath as I focused my concentration and began to feed my magical energy into my dress.

Like the Airdra, the dress and coat combination really was a masterpiece.

The embroidery was the gem of the whole design, the culmination of all my research on spirit stones. It was made from what you could probably call artificial magicite, which was in turn derived from my Impressed Seal and a sample of Lainie's magicite.

Indeed, these pieces of artificial magicite were only possible thanks to the mountain of our prior research, along with Euphie's advanced understanding of magic after having become a spirit covenantor.

These pieces of artificial magicite served as its core, converted into thread and knit into the form of a dress. I had spent a considerable fortune on development costs and trials, to the point that it had almost overwhelmed my finances, but it had all been a necessary expense.

With this, flight magic ought to be safe to use… Even for me.

I had dreamed of this from the beginning.

The magic to make people smile, the very first magic I had ever longed for.

I reached out my hand, extending my palm as though to grasp the sky itself. The crowd, breathless, stared back at Euphie and me. Even the aristocrats at the Ministry of the Arcane, never ones to conceal their dislike for me, wore expressions of utter disbelief.

I spotted Ilia and Lainie in a corner of the gathering, both holding their hands clasped in front of their chests in prayer. I glanced, too, at my father and mother, who nodded strongly as our gazes met.

Duke Grantz was staring our way as well, along with Lumielle by his side, offering us both a wry smile.

Then there was Tilty, lips moving in an inaudible snort. *Go—*

that was the word her smile called to mind.

I had the backing of so many friends and family. I would also have to thank all the craftsmen in the castle town who hadn't been able to make it to this unveiling.

No longer did my dream belong to me alone. I turned to Euphie, standing by my side, and our gazes intertwined. We both offered the other a warm smile.

"Euphie… Let's go!"

"Yes, Lady Anis. Shall we fly?"

Hearing Euphie's response, I took off running, racing toward the castle walls to pick up enough speed.

With each step, my speed continued to increase. At this rate, I risked charging straight into the walls—just as I had done as a child, after making a mistake with a wind-type spirit stone.

But things were different this time. I had moved forward—and I would keep moving forward!

"Flyyyyy!"

As I cried out at the top of my lungs, a pair of *wings* spread wide.

Pulled aloft by wings of light almost the same color as the sky itself, my body lifted up into the air and soared over the looming wall. Those wings stretched out, imparting me with an unmistakably buoyancy.

Behind me, I could hear cries of astonishment, followed by delayed cheers of joy. But those voices were quickly fading into the distance. The artificial spirit stones were functioning without issue, lifting me high into the sky.

One step behind me, Euphie followed in pursuit.

While my wings were sky blue in hue, those extending from her back were all the colors of the rainbow. I didn't say it aloud, but I couldn't help but think that she resembled a fairy.

Wings of cerulean blue—and wings like a radiant rainbow. We each caught the wind beneath us, soaring through the sky, reaching out for high fives as we danced in midair. Smiling joyously at each other, we made our way to the castle town.

The crowd of onlookers who had come to see the first public flight of the Airdra, as announced in advance, appeared to be

overwhelmed by the sight of us flying by ourselves with our wings spread wide.

Among them, I spotted Tomas and a group of craftsmen who had been involved in creating the Airdra and these special outfits. They looked to have been waiting for us, as they called out our names and waved their arms in excitement.

After flying over the heads of Tomas and the others, we increased our altitude as we made our way back up into the sky.

That performance must have served only to add more fuel to everyone's excitement, as I could hear cheers erupting from all over the castle town.

"Lady Anis!" Euphie called out to me.

"Euphie!" I cried back in response.

We adjusted course to a central position over the castle town, from which those in the royal castle would have a clear view of us, and faced each other.

It was time to show them our dream in its purest form—an aerial dance conducted in the skies above!

Humans weren't graced with wings, so people had no means to fly. The sky wasn't our domain. But that would end today! We would prove once and for all that we *could* fly freely!

"The stage is set! Let's do this, Celestial!"

I pulled the magical sword from its scabbard and held it out toward Euphie.

Euphie likewise drew her Arc-en-Ciel and swept toward me as she brought the blade swinging down, leaving me to intercept her strike with the Celestial.

The sound of our swashbuckling echoed high in the sky. Since we had no ground to hold up there in the air, we swung around as our strikes repelled one another, before coming together as our weapons collided once more.

After several such exchanges, we circled one another at a distance—when Euphie began to direct her magic my way.

"Air Cutter!"

Euphie spread her rainbow-colored wings wide and rose higher as she brandished the Arc-en-Ciel, sending a blade of wind careening as she traced a line through the air.

“Not enough!”

I evaded the oncoming strike by arcing my back and somersaulting through the air toward Euphie, but she continued to launch further attacks to keep me at bay.

Unable to respond to so many strikes, I changed course, adopting a steep angle to aid in my escape. Euphie, until that moment maintaining her position, likewise began to move, this time lessening her buoyancy to speed down toward the ground.

“I won’t let you get away!”

I continued to accelerate, chasing after Euphie as we both pummeled toward the ground. She, I noticed, was frowning slightly.

Outwardly, it must have looked as though we were both flying under the same conditions, but in truth, we were using very different techniques to stay aloft.

Euphie was ultimately propelled by her own flight magic, her outfit serving merely to assist her. As such, her magical tool had been configured mainly to help her maintain her ability to float.

For that reason, there was a limit on the amount of magic she could deploy while flying. She herself had said it would be difficult to keep moving if she tried to deploy any forms of large-scale magic.

On the other hand, I was flying solely through the use of my magical tool. In my case, it was the artificial magicite that Euphie had assembled, incorporating specialized magic, that made my flight possible. While she was directly controlling her own trajectory, I directed my course through that artificial magicite, and so both methods were ultimately quite different.

“Take this!” I cried, swinging the Celestial wide and forcing Euphie to adjust the Arc-en-Ciel to catch my strike.

She followed through, slipping past as though trying to pull me after her, before delivering a powerful kick to my back.

“Got you now!”

The momentum from that kick sent me hurtling straight toward the ground. Regaining my posture with a forward roll, I landed with both feet on the rooftop of a building.

Whoa, she slipped right past me! I guess you can’t beat the freedom of movement that directly using your own magic brings!

Kicking off from the roof, I soared once more into the sky—but the difference in our respective flight ability was starting to weigh on me. Indirect control through artificial magicite clearly didn’t

afford as much flexibility as directly manipulating one's own magic.

"But I'm not out of tricks!"

I gathered my magical energy, accelerating my movements. I might have been second to Euphie in terms of maneuverability, but it took her considerable concentration to stay airborne.

Indirect flight control meant it wasn't possible to perform complicated operations. However, I couldn't possibly lose if I poured everything that I had into attacking powerfully and swiftly. If Euphie tried to match me, she would have to split her attention between acceleration and control. So long as I didn't lose my nerve, I was bound to come out on top!

Euphie knew this, too, which was why she tried to evade my assault by diverting to a complicated arcing trajectory. But I had already figured out how to evade it!

"Extend!"

My magical sword responded to my will, the blade extending with considerable force as I spun through the air, sweeping the weapon toward Euphie.

Perhaps she had already anticipated this move, as she used her own Arc-en-Ciel as a shield to block the blow, before taking advantage of the recoil to place some distance between us.

You won't get away!

But as I chased after her, Euphie flashed me a joyous smile and spun around to meet me.

"Isn't this wonderful, Lady Anis? It's so nice to be free!"

"Ha-ha-ha! That's right! Look how much fun we're having!"

The sky truly was freedom. With wings, we could go anywhere. It was a different feeling from flying on my Witch's Broom or the Airdra—fresher, more vivid, enough to bring one's heart close to bursting with delight.

"Still, you're terrifying!" Euphie called out.

"What are you so scared of?!" I cried back.

"I'm a little annoyed to see how well you're flying!"

"Well, I can't lose to someone who only just learned how to fly!"

"I hate to admit it, but when it comes to flying, I'm no match for you! Under the same conditions, I couldn't possibly win! But I see it now—*this* is the world you saw in your dreams…!"

Euphie was so excited that she couldn't stop talking. She certainly didn't usually show this level of joy and surprise.

“I’m scared to go…! But it’s so *fun*! My heart is bursting with joy, Lady Anis!”

I giggled to myself. It certainly wasn’t like her to say something like that aloud, either. But hearing her exclaim how happy she was, I started to think.

We had both enjoyed this aerial dance, from the very bottom of our hearts.

“So I don’t want to let it end so easily!” Euphie cried, bringing the Arc-en-Ciel around once more.

The arc of her sword let loose a rainbow-colored barrage with a trailing tail of light, unleashing a scattershot of projectiles comprised of magical energy charged with a potent mix of attributes.

“What?! That’s a little dangerous, no?! Mana Shield!”

Realizing I wouldn’t be able to intercept them in time, I raised my hand—and as I did so, a wall of magical energy erupted from the bracelet at my wrist, catching the bombardment before it could hit me. The recoil, however, sent me reeling backward.

Gliding through the sky, I circled back and turned that momentum to my advantage to charge toward Euphie.

“Payback! Celestial! Over-edge Separation!”

The magical blade of my Celestial, which I swung in a wide arc, detached from the hilt and careered in its target’s direction.

As the blow approached, Euphie spread the iridescent wings at her back wide, braced herself, and boosted the power of her own weapon, too.

“Arc-en-Ciel: Over-edge!”

With a brilliant flash, the Arc-en-Ciel carved the Celestial’s magical blade clean in half. Euphie broke into a slight frown at this reaction—but at that moment, I channeled as much magical power as I could into my acceleration. Now was my chance!

“I’ve got you nooooowwwww!”

I stretched out my hand and grabbed Euphie by the arm, swinging her around at such speed that she would have to dedicate all her concentration to keep from spiraling out of control.

“Gah! Arghhhhh!”

“Wh-wh-whoa! That hurts!”

In desperation, Euphie sent lightning coursing down her entire body—the pain and numbness that hit my hand forcing me to pull away. Taking advantage of that opportunity, she then increased her

own speed and accelerated to follow after me.

Then, an eyebrow raised in a frown, she slammed into my stomach with a powerful dropkick.

“Gah?!”

The momentum sent me careening toward the ground. I was able to slow my descent, but it wasn’t enough to angle myself sufficiently to climb back up into the sky, and so channeling my magical energy into my feet, I prepared myself to endure the force of landing. The impact made my legs go numb, but refusing to stop there, I kicked off from the roof and soared into the air once again.

“Euphie?!”

Having lost sight of her, I glanced at the sky and spotted her floating there with the Arc-en-Ciel.

She had deployed a large magic circle beneath her feet, while a rainbow-colored barrage of projectiles surrounded her like an expanding star before careening my way, each at varying velocities.

As I soared back upward, I cut through those bombardments with the blade of my Celestial—but the projectiles continued to increase in size and number.

“I’ll just have to take them out at the source, then!”

The Celestial absorbed every ounce of magical energy I poured into it, growing several times longer than I was tall as I brought it swinging down toward Euphie.

“Aughhhhh!”

I was able to deflect the barrage of projectiles she had sent my way, but Euphie, naturally, had guessed the trajectory of my follow-through and spun through the air in an attempt to circle around behind me.

Hoping to outdo her, I adjusted the size of my own weapon once more and turned around to face her.

At that moment, her strike approached, and I lashed out with the Celestial to repel it. Our magical blades clashed against one another strike after strike, separating and coming back together over and over.

Each time one of us caught up to the other, our blades would meet, and the pursuer would become the pursued. Euphie and I collided again and again, flying up and down, left and right, at a dizzying pace.

“Euphie!”

“Lady Anis!”

We were both smiling, enjoying our dance high in the sky. But this couldn't go on forever. All of a sudden, we both stopped, staring across at one another. Sweat ran down my cheeks before being scattered by the wind.

"…I've used up most of my magical energy," I remarked.

"…Yes, I can see," Euphie answered.

Since my flying tool was packed with so many functions, its main drawback was in how much energy it consumed. For my own safety, it would be best to end our dance here.

Euphie floated my way, reaching out to me so we could clutch each other's hands.

Her face was beaming, but I sensed a touch of regret in her demeanor. I felt the same way.

At that moment, a wave of cheers reached us from beneath our feet.

In the castle town below, everyone was crying out at the top of their lungs, waving their hands in excitement. I could make out more than a few cheers from the direction of the royal palace as well.

As far as the applause was concerned, there was no difference in terms of status. I could see people from the castle town, knights, itinerant travelers, and members of the aristocracy, too. Everyone was smiling, everyone calling out in praise.

"…Lady Anis."

Euphie tightened her grip, intertwining her fingers around mine. I could feel fresh tears wetting my cheeks.

The widespread adoption of magical tools would help others to use magic, even people like me who otherwise had no innate potential. Just as they had allowed me to soar through the sky, they would open up new possibilities for everyone.

After all, everyone had a dream they held dear to their heart. Ah, what a wonderful future we had in store!

I couldn't say there wouldn't be difficulties. But right now, for this moment in time, everyone was smiling, cheering, immersing themselves in joy.

"…Ngh…!" I grunted, trying to hold back my tears.

Seeing all this, I knew in my heart that my dream, my hope, had been accepted by everyone. This was everything I had always wanted.

I had been dreaming of this scene ever since I first became

aware of my past life. I had almost given up on it, all but convinced myself it would never come true.

I may have been born into royalty, but I wasn't blessed with the talents society demanded of royalty, and so no one saw anything of value in me. But because of that, I was free; I could go anywhere. And all that time, I had been alone. But not anymore.

I wasn't an eccentric, nor was I a princess disqualified from calling herself royalty. I could now say with a pride that I *was* a princess, one who had soared across the sky. And at this moment, something told me I was precisely what this world most wanted.

"Smile, Lady Anis."

"Euphie…"

"That's what everyone wants—to see you smile," Euphie said with a grin of her own.

Yet still my tears continued to flow unabated—and so I decided to smile in spite of them. I glanced down once more. The cheering of the people below hadn't stopped, and countless faces were still fixated on us.

I waved their way, as though to make my presence known, and the voices of the crowd swelled up, filling the sky with hope.

As I waved a second time, the cheers exploded. Listening to those acclamations, I glanced toward the Celestial, which I still held grasped in my hands, a singular thought taking root in my mind.

"…Euphie. Stay with me a little longer."

"Lady Anis?"

"That rainbow sword you showed me earlier… Can you summon it now?"

"…If you want me to."

"Please. I'll try to do it myself, too."

We held on to each other's hands as we each reached to our swords in their scabbards and lifted them into the air. I poured my magical energy into the Celestial, just as Euphie did the same with the Arc-en-Ciel.

The depths of the Celestial's reserves were beyond compare, richer and fuller than a regular Mana Blade. Thanks to that, I was absolutely sure of it—I, too, would be able to pull off what Euphie had done the other day.

At that moment, the energy within the Celestial changed to my touch. The hilt, already tinged with light, began to crystalize with an azure blue, the color of my magical energy.

Euphie, too, had infused the Arc-en-Ciel with a rainbow-colored crystalline blade. I glanced her way for a second before raising my sword to the sky.

Euphie likewise held the Arc-en-Ciel aloft, pressing it against the Celestial with a soft clink.

"Let's fill the skies above…"

"…with rainbows."

The next thing that I knew, both swords began to radiate particles of brilliant light. Euphie and I flew in a circle over the royal capital, luminescent shards descending from the two swords like a rain of light.

Those glittering, sparkling points of light stretched out to reach everyone watching. The spectators, one and all, stood transfixed, children reaching into the air in gleeful joy.

Euphie and I climbed higher into the air once more, holding our magical swords aloft.

She understood what I wanted to do without me needing to say anything. We acted in perfect unison—I simply nodded in confirmation, and she smiled back.

The wish that I wanted to convey now was gratitude—my thanks for having been born in this world, for having been raised in this country, for all the people who had guided me over the years.

"To all the people who dwell in this land…"

"…blessings be upon you!"

As we wove those words of prayers, our crystalline swords let out a brilliant flash.

Light scattered across the sky like fireworks. Bursts of azure and rainbow-colored particles melted through the air, shining with all their radiance. Just as I had hoped, this was a blessing to all those watching.

The cheers below still hadn't let up. This time, it wasn't only children reaching out for the falling particles of light—everyone held their hands outstretched. Those brilliant pinpoints, melting away against our skin, were so fantastic that I couldn't even speak.

I remained that way seemingly forever, holding tightly to

Euphie’s hand, until the scene slowly came to an end.

Ever since becoming aware of my past life, I found myself reflecting more and more on the differences between the world I remembered and the one I found myself inhabiting now.

The world I had glimpsed in my previous life was more mysterious than this one, always continually developing in new ways. That was no doubt why it afforded people more freedom than this the one I now called home. With that much development, that much progress, one might think that my previous world had more to offer than this present one.

But in *this* world, magic existed. There were spirits, and monsters, too. As I learned what it meant to live here, I became convinced that I would be able to advance into unknown territory if I could only combine my knowledge of my past life with those things that existed exclusively in this place.

The vision of the future that emerged from this conviction was my dream to fly. That was my first desire. I thought everyone would be so surprised if I could make that image a reality.

And in the depths of my heart, I had harbored another hope—that if I did that, they might finally acknowledge me.

Reflecting on my past, memory by memory, I built up an outline of who I was. I had been averting my gaze from my true self for so long.

I had been swept away, led in opposing directions by so many things throughout my life. Memories of my previous life, the responsibilities of royalty, the fact that I couldn't wield magic, and a host of other realities had constantly swirled around me.

I thought I had been running toward my aspirations. That was half the reason—the other half was that if I couldn't find solace in my dreams, I would grind to a stop. If I stopped running, despair would take over, so I pretended not to be able to see it.

Now I could finally reflect properly on myself. Others had accepted me, I had proven several times over that I truly was alive in this world, and now that my once-uncertain feet had found firm ground, I could finally look back.

It was like the end of a long dream. Something inside me had

reached its endpoint. The realization that whatever had occupied my heart was now fading, melting away inside me, made me only more aware of this sense of finality.

"…It's over."

I thought back over what I had accomplished today, and my thoughts began to sound from my lips. The sun had already set, and night was coming on. I stepped out into the courtyard of the detached palace, muttering to myself under my breath as I stared up at the moon and stars hanging overhead.

The public demonstration of my flying magical tools had been a success—not only the Airdra, but also the artificial magicite and the dresses made possible by all my other research activities thus far.

I had been able to surprise everyone with today's unveiling. I was filled with a sense of accomplishment for my achievement and pride in being recognized by so many—and those two emotions continued to warm my heart.

"…I could die happy now…"

"What kind of nonsense is that?" Ilia responded in indignation.

"…Ilia?"

She stepped out into the courtyard, stood alongside me, and gazed up toward the moon. I glanced her way for a moment, taking in her profile illuminated by the moonlight, before turning back to the sky above.

Ilia said nothing, so I didn't speak, either. The silence was a little awkward, but no words came to mind as the minutes passed between us. Still, I couldn't let this go on forever, and so I tried calling out to her.

"Ilia—"

"Your Highness—"

We glanced at one another in surprise, both of us having spoken up at the exact same moment. Seeing Ilia's eyes widening in shock, I let out a chortle of amusement—and with that, her expression relaxed.

"Why don't you go first, Ilia? If there's something you want to say."

"No, you go first, Your Highness."

"Er… Well, all right. Are you sure you want to be in my service, Ilia?"

"…Why would you ask that?" she demanded quietly, her eyes narrowing in alarm.

I averted my gaze, staring into the sky again. “I thought this was a good time to see how you feel. You’ve always spoiled me. And I’m happy with this relationship. We don’t need to change anything or seek anything else from the other. We’re close—and I’m not alone.”

“…Indeed. I enjoy our time together, too.”

“I see… But you’ve humored my selfish whims for so long that I wonder whether I shouldn’t try to give something back in return…”

As I uttered those words, Ilia’s shoulders drooped in a sigh.

Then, as though holding back laughter, they began to tremble.

I stared at her askance, wondering why she was suddenly so amused. “I-Ilia?”

“…Excuse me. What you said was just so funny… I couldn’t help myself.”

“Did I say something strange…?”

“No. We were both thinking along similar lines. It felt a little odd, that’s all…” Having said that, Ilia turned to face me. Her expression was soft, relaxed, and seemed to have gained a quality that she had previously been lacking. “This latest affair made me realize my own inadequacies… I thought maybe I should take some time off.”

“Huh? Th-that could cause a bit of disruption around here… But what do you mean, *inadequacies*…?”

“I wasn’t able to help resolve so much as a single one of your troubles, even after watching you suffer for so long… I feel incompetent.”

“…But I never expected you to do anything like that. We were both comfortable the way things were, without doing anything to step on the other’s toes.”

“…Yes, we were. So I’ve been contemplating what it means to be here.”

“…Have you grown tired of the detached palace?”

Ilia seemed to be at a loss from this question, her mouth slamming shut. When finally she spoke up once more, her voice seemed almost dejected. “…I think I’ve grown tired of myself. I couldn’t do anything to help you, Your Highness.”

“That’s not true at all…!” Sorrow welling up inside me at Ilia’s words. I wished she hadn’t said such a thing. “That’s not true, Ilia. We…never had to solve anything for each other.”

“…Your Highness?”

“I mean, I know it can be incredibly hard to change things. We both knew there were things we couldn’t do for each other, that if we wanted to change what existed between us, that it certainly wouldn’t be easy. I’m glad we have the relationship we do.”

People didn’t change easily. I mean, no matter what, I simply couldn’t give up on magic.

It was important to make efforts to change and grow. However, if that was our only goal, we would break. We might grow tired of change, of moving forward, and find ourselves completely stagnant.

“So I didn’t want you to do anything. Having you by my side is more than enough to save me…”

Maybe we were accustomed to licking each other’s wounds? We knew what we both were, and the two of us were content with that.

Still, people *did* have to change at some point. Even if it wasn’t easy, it was proof that we were indeed alive.

Until now, Ilia and I had found a sense of security in the constancy of each other’s company in our small private world at the detached palace. But now, a time of change was upon us. With the arrival of Euphie and Lainie, the days ahead looked very different from how they had before.

I did have my anxieties. But now, I had even greater expectations for tomorrow. I knew for a fact that I had better days yet waiting for me.

“We just didn’t have the right chance to help change each other. But we *have* made it this far. That’s enough for me. That’s all that matters,” I said.

“…It is?”

“Yeah. So it’s fine, for us to change as we move forward. We just need to do our best to do what we both really want.”

My dreams were now connected to Euphie. Even Ilia had grown since welcoming Lainie into the detached palace.

We couldn’t stay the same forever. But now I knew for a fact that there was something to be gained in transformation.

“Do you want to leave the detached palace, Ilia?”

“…No. I want to watch over you a while longer, Your Highness. If you would permit me to remain by your side, that is.”

“I don’t want to you leave… You’re like an elder sister to me, Ilia.”

No matter what I did, she never gave up on me. No matter how reckless I was, she was always there for me. Not once had she

abandoned me. So given our relationship, I really did think of her as a sister.

Ilia wore an indescribable expression in response to my affectionate words. She was trying to hold back her emotions and failing.

"…If you will forgive my indiscretion in saying so, I think of you like a younger sister, Your Highness."

"Ilia…"

"Which is why I will feel rather lonely to leave you behind. But you will have Lady Euphyllia by your side from now on."

"In that case, you have Lainie, too, don't you? Your adorable little student."

"Indeed. I suppose that we, and life at the detached palace, too, will evolve little by little in the days to come," Ilia said, a smile forming on her lips.

I couldn't hold back a grin. "Hey, Ilia. Do you mind if I say something selfish?"

"Such as what?"

"I want you to call me by my name."

I wanted her to address me not as a princess as we embarked on a new relationship, but as *me*, as the person standing right here, who had long been by her side.

Ilia nodded along solemnly. "Very well, Lady Anisphia."

"Yep. Here's to the future, Ilia."

As we each laughed at how this conversation had turned out, I heard Lainie calling after us both.

"Ah, yes," Ilia murmured, as though only now remembering something. "I came to inform you that dinner is ready. It seems we've kept Lainie waiting."

"I'll have to apologize, then. Euphie must be waiting, too. Shall we go?"

"Yes, let's."

Walking shoulder to shoulder, we made our way back inside. Life at the detached palace, which had remained static for so very long, was undergoing new changes. Filled with new conviction, I returned to the villa with Ilia by my side.

* * *

The name of the queen who ushered in an end to an age of tradition that stretched back to the very beginning of the Kingdom of Palettia remains in the annals of history.

The first king, who stood to save his people from suffering, hardship, and exhaustion, founded the Kingdom of Palettia by entering into a covenant with spirits.

The people of the kingdom, established through the feat of a spirit covenant, enjoyed great wealth and prosperity for many a year under the guidance of their spiritualist beliefs.

However, the time had come for these long-lasting traditions to evolve. Conflict between the aristocracy and the common folk, divided by their ability to wield magic, had reached a head. An impossible gulf had emerged between a nobility corrupted by their long years of authority and a common folk laboring under oppression.

It would be no exaggeration to say that the history of this realm, which began with the people's salvation, was on the verge of collapse after it became corrupted by its own success.

And so a new queen arose, a spirit covenantor herself, the same as the founding king. Through this great feat, she brought an end to that age of tradition.

That queen's name was Euphyllia Fez Palettia.

Formerly the daughter of a ducal house, she was adopted into the royal family to become queen after the incredible feat of achieving a spirit covenant.

To treat the corruption that had taken root throughout the realm, she stood at the very pinnacle of the kingdom, bearing a symbol of tradition on her back, and laid the foundation for a revolution. From the past era to the next, she bequeathed the future to the following generation.

And by Queen Euphyllia's side was a princess who had inherited the blood of the original royal family.

She was an innovator long oppressed by tradition, a pioneer of the new age, a princess who loved magic more than anyone, though she herself was unable to wield it.

That princess's name was Anisphia Wynn Palettia.

These two young ladies served to build a bridge between tradition and revolution, their feats becoming the stuff of legend for generations to come.

But such great deeds remained a long way off. After all, their revolution had only just begun.

* * *

"Lady Anis, if you don't wake up soon, you'll be late for the meeting."

"Huh…? Just give me…a few more minutes…"

"…I'm afraid you leave me no choice."

"Gwah?! It's freezing! My blanket!"

"Won't you get out of bed already?"

"Ngh… Ilia… Fine… I'll get up… I'm up, see…?"

With my blanket having been forcibly stripped away, I got out of bed and sat myself down in front of my mirror stand so Ilia could help me get dressed.

I had stayed up late yesterday after getting carried away arranging my research materials. I had known full well that it would make what I had to do this morning more difficult, but I had to do whatever I could in the time that I had.

I almost fell asleep a few times in the process, but eventually, I finished making myself look presentable, and so Ilia led me to the dining room. The scents of a delicious breakfast already filled the air.

"Argh, Lady Anis! You're late! Your breakfast will be getting cold!"

"Ugh. Sorry, Lainie…"

Now that Lainie had become used to life in the detached palace, she didn't hesitate to scold me as though dealing with an inattentive child. I couldn't help but shrink back. I knew full well that I was the one in the wrong here, so it was natural that she was angry.

At that moment, laughter erupted from a corner of the room. It had come from Euphie, watching on all this time from her seat beside mine.

"Good morning, Lady Anis," she said.

"Morning, Euphie," I answered.

Several months had passed since the demonstration of our

flying magical tools. After our presentation, the palace had issued a formal announcement that Euphie had become a spirit covenantor and would also be adopted into the royal family.

Her name had changed from Euphyllia Magenta to Euphyllia Fez Palettia, and she was now officially a princess.

Naturally, there had been an uproar following the announcement. Those nobles who had been hesitant to recognize me as their future queen in spite of the general acceptance of my magicology achievements were quick to welcome Euphie as the second coming of a legend.

She had been named Second Princess and had likewise won the right to succeed to the throne. The first task that she set herself was to bring all those nobles who still held on to their traditional beliefs under her wing and update their thinking.

As he had previously declared, Duke Grantz vowed after Euphie's adoption to completely break off all ties with his daughter.

As such, Euphie had entered the royal family without anyone's backing, though she professed to have accepted that as the challenge her father had issued her.

If she couldn't form a faction of her own and unite the various nobles, there would be no talk of her becoming queen. For that reason, Duke Grantz was still officially maintaining his support of my claim.

For her part, Euphie was busy trying to recruit the more traditionally minded nobles at the Ministry of the Arcane to join her. Not only did she hope to bring them together, she was also intent on convincing them to accept magicology in spite of their stubborn adherence to custom. I certainly wasn't envious of the task ahead of her.

But to be honest, I wasn't particularly worried. I was confident she could do it. And I still had my own work to do. In the future, once Euphie's rule was firmly established, it would fall on me to spread my magicology far and wide to the nobles and the common folk alike.

We were each doing our best to build the same future. We had less time to spend together lately, but I felt that we were closer than ever before.

"Euphie, you don't have to address me with that title anymore."

"…It's become a habit. I'll be more careful, Anis."

We were now ostensibly stepsisters, but we didn't really think

of ourselves like that. Even now, trying to think of words that could adequately describe what existed between us just made me clam up with embarrassment.

She was the person whom I loved most in this world. I couldn't stand to be apart from her, to the point where I felt like only half of a whole. She was a partner with whom I could dream together—my Euphie.

Thanks to her, I could believe in the future. No doubt we would face many challenges trying to reform the kingdom. But even so, she would be there for me.

And not only her—Ilia, Lainie, my father, my mother, Duke Grantz, and so many more were also lending me their strength.

I wasn't alone. My dreams were for more than just me now. And that was why I could step boldly into the future.

"…Anis?"

"Hmm?"

"Is something wrong? You look a little pensive."

"…It's nothing."

I had simply been thinking how happy I was. I could live here, as myself. Over the years, I had ended up causing so many things to go awry. Those regrets still burdened me. But even carrying them, I had a reason to live.

And I *would* live, in this world, as the First Princess of the Kingdom of Palettia. For the futures of everyone who called this country their home. And above all, to realize the future I had always dreamed of.

"Lady Anisphia, Lady Euphyllia. If you don't leave soon, you won't make it in time."

"Huh?! It's that late already?!"

"You're such a sleepyhead, Lady Anis."

Looking carefully, I noticed that Euphie had already finished eating. I still had around half of my own breakfast left. It wasn't the most dignified thing to do, but I stuffed what remained into my mouth and washed it down with a glass of water.

Sure enough, I could feel a hint of murder in Ilia's and Lainie's gazes, but I tried to ignore that as I rose to my feet.

"Thanks for the food! Let's go, Euphie!"

"Yes. Shall we?"

Strictly speaking, we had different destinations, but it was nice all the same to leave the detached palace in each other's company.

Sparing a thought for her gentle, tickling gaze, I made my way to the entrance. I had a busy day ahead of me, I was sure of it—although lately I seemed to have that same feeling every day.

But I was happy for it. One day, I would no doubt look back with fondness on this busy, hectic time. So I would keep running toward that future of my dreams, as fast as my feet could carry me.

"Euphie?"

"Yes?"

This was our usual exchange before we headed out. I gave her a kiss on the cheek to encourage her to do her best, while she offered me one in turn as though to wish me good luck.

To be honest, I still wasn't used to this, and I could feel my cheeks burning. But Euphie insisted, and I couldn't turn her down, so while I was embarrassed, I didn't really mind.

"…When will you let me kiss you on the lips again, I wonder?" she asked.

"I—I don't know…!"

"Hee-hee. I'm looking forward to it," she said, suddenly giving me a light peck on the lips.

Taken by surprise, I could feel my face turning redder still.

"Euphie!" I cried aloud.

"You'll be late, Anis," she said, taking off with a flutter of her skirt.

This mischievous Euphie seemed truly joyful, from the very bottom of her heart. She was so dear to me that I almost didn't know what to do, but that didn't stop me from stepping boldly out from the detached palace to follow after her.

Piero Karasu here. Thank you so much for picking up the third volume of *The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady*. I'm so happy to have been able to safely deliver this next volume of the tale to you all.

Those who have read the web version might be surprised to see that the contents of this third volume have changed considerably. I'll touch a little on these alterations here in the afterword.

I was blessed with an opportunity to revisit the work after first serializing the web version and to take stead of how my own feelings had evolved as I revised the first and second ones.

The first volume saw extensive changes surrounding the dragon attack, while the second revised the character of Tilty. But as I made changes to both works, I found myself wondering—what was the *real* heart of the story? And in the end, my thoughts settled on the relationship between Anisphia and Euphyllia.

As such, I decided to pick up on their relationship this time around.

When it comes to that relationship, one thing that simply can't be left out is their mutual love for magic. One the one hand, Anisphia has always yearned for magic but has never been able to attain it. On the other, Euphyllia is blessed with abundant talent but has been unable to achieve her own desires. In a very real sense, it is magic that lies between these two polar opposites.

To many, the word *magic* is synonymous with fantasy, and I hope that it will always be something capable of filling our hearts with joy and delight.

This world, with magic as its centerpiece, can be difficult and painful at times, but it is also capable of instilling us with hope—a hope that our two heroines can laugh by one another's side.

With this third volume, the first arc of the tale is complete. But the story is hardly over—Anis's and Euphie's revolution has only just begun.

I'm pleased to announce that Harutsugu Nadaka's manga adaptation has already started serialization, and I'm overjoyed to see how positively it has been received. I can't wait to see how this

world continues to grow in the manga version.

I would like to thank Yuri Kisaragi for the brilliant illustrations, my editor for all the assistance in penning this latest volume, and every one of my readers who picked up a copy. I hope to see you again in the afterword to the next one.

Piero Karasu

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